

SLOW START

There was no backing out now: I was down to my panties and bra and he was already taking off his pants. In a moment he'd come to me and, though I'd want him, I was sure it would be no good.

Frank put his arms around me and unhooked my bra.

"No," I cried. "Let's forget it."

He picked me up and carried me to the bed. "Give it a chance," he said. "This time it'll be different. Relax—you'll see."

Sure, I thought—only I didn't believe him. He was kissing me gently, kneading my breasts and I wanted to laugh at how patient he was. Then his lips touched the tips of my breasts and a tingling sensation started in the pit of my stomach. This would only make it worse, I thought, trying to push him away.

His hand had moved down over my stomach, his fingers stopping—searching, then starting again with subtle, knowing perfection. I could feel my buttocks tighten, thighs arching forward as my back grew rigid. Suddenly, I was digging my nails into his shoulders, feeling a tension I had never felt before.

His hands were on my thighs, burning me. Then he stopped.

I gripped his shoulders. "Please—don't stop. . . ."

HORIZONTAL SECRETARY

By Amy Harris

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CHAPTER ONE

I jerked away from him then jumped to my feet and began buttoning my blouse; the top two buttons. It was as far as he'd gotten and even that was too far. My fingers were trembling. I wondered what was wrong with me—why I'd ever let him touch me like that. I shouldn't have let him come up.

He leaned back and lit a cigarette, seemingly relaxed but his free hand kept clenching and unclenching.

"Don't bother lighting that," I offered with cold contempt, "Get out."

"Come off it Ellie." He struck a match, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs.

"Come off *what*? I told you to get out!"

"You loved it."

I could feel the color rising to my cheeks.

"Just answer me one question—" he went on, "okay? What the hell are you saving it for?"

I swallowed hard, "That's disgusting."

"What? Sex? You sure as hell didn't think so five minutes ago."

I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes and looked away so he wouldn't see. "Look, this is my apartment and I'm asking you to leave."

"It's raining."

"You'll live."

He grinned. "Wouldn't you feel lousy if I didn't?"

"No."

He hesitated, then stood up. I took a good look at him. He was tall—about six-foot four with blond hair and gray eyes. I looked at his shoulders; his arms—and remembered all the times I'd dreamed of having those arms around me, only not like this. It wasn't supposed to have turned out like this.

"So, really—What are you saving it for?" he said, smirking.

"I asked you to leave."

"A girl with a body like yours!" He shook his head.

"How old are you?"

"What?"

"About my age. About twenty-nine, right?"

"*I'm twenty-seven!*" I was sorry as soon as I'd said it. He'd wanted to know—it was none of his business, and he'd won!

"So you're twenty seven. And next year, you'll be twenty eight, then twenty nine——"

"That's usually the way it happens," I answered dryly.

"And you're gorgeous. But ten years from now, you won't be. You *still* going to be saving it?"

"I wish you'd stop using that expression."

"Pardon me." It came out sarcastic. "I didn't mean to be vulgar. But don't you think you cheated—at least a little?"

I walked to the window and lit a cigarette. "I don't know what you're talking about." Only I knew I was kidding myself. Blake was assistant head of the public relations department in the company where I'd worked as a secretary almost since graduation from high school. I'd wanted him to notice me from the first day I met him, but there was nothing wrong with that. So maybe I *had* kidded around and implied I might be interested in going to bed with him, but it wasn't *my* fault if he took it seriously. I only wanted him to pay some attention to me.

Only then I started wondering why. I knew all the rumors about him—how he'd been divorced twice for playing around with other women—so it couldn't have been that I wanted to *marry* him. When *I* got married, it would be forever. And it couldn't have been that I wanted his companionship, either—I didn't even like him. He was smooth and charming when it came to anyone who might get the agency some publicity, but anyone who'd been around the office for even a week knew it was all an act.

The only reason left was that I wanted to go to bed with him; only that was ridiculous. *I didn't* want him! It was just that when he touched me, something happened—something I didn't want that made my heart beat faster and sent little shivers all through me. And he knew it; dammit, he knew it!

"You know what I'm talking about," he answered quietly. "Why did you invite me up here?"

"I—I asked you for coffee. It's raining, and I thought you might want some coffee before you went home."

He grinned. "Yeah?"

"Will you *please* get out?"

"Sure——" He put his hands on my shoulders and I started to break away, but the whole thing was happening all over again; I wanted more. I didn't know *what* I wanted.

He ran his hands through my hair. "Hey, red-head——" he whispered, "Hey, Ellie——"

"What?"

He kissed me and at first I stayed rigid, then my arms were around him, my lips meeting his, wanting the closeness of his body, the feel of his hands moving hard over my thighs then up to my breasts.

I'd always sworn I'd never sleep with a man outside of marriage, only that was before—before I'd looked in the mirror and realized I was twenty-seven and alone; before I'd known there were no enchanted evenings with a stranger across the room who'd fall in love with me. Oh sure, I could have married the boy next door, but I'd wanted more. I suppose it was funny. I'd wanted more, and here I was with Blake Gelezio wondering whether I'd go all the way for the simple reason that his arms were strong and he was attractive and wanted me.

"Ellie——" he whispered, "Ellie, baby—I'm nuts about you."

I knew he was lying. So what? As long as he kept pretending, so could I. It was a stupid little scene we were playing. If only he'd left—if only he'd left without touching me, I'd have been able to think more clearly. It had been all right when I'd broken away from him; when he'd first tried to open my blouse. If only it hadn't been Blake. I thought of other guys who'd tried—guys with at least some small degree of

tenderness or respect for me—guys I'd *liked*—men I could call *friends*, but Blake—a conceited sun god, tall and blond and crude? I wondered what perverse sense of justice made Blake the one I let touch me—made Blake the one I'd dreamed about as I'd never wanted to dream about any man I wasn't married to.

I haven't decided, I thought, *I haven't decided either way*, Mr. Irresistable Gelezio, *it's up to you*.

I felt his lips against my throat. "Honey, there's nothing wrong about it. You're wasting time—you're wasting years, and what does it get you?"

I wondered whether this was his standard line with virgins. I remembered the first time a guy had told me his wife didn't understand him. I'd felt so sorry—so sympathetic. It seemed like centuries ago.

"A girl like you—you could really live. There's a whole world, honey—a whole big world you don't know anything about."

"And you're just the guy to show it to me, right?"

He dropped his arms and stepped back. I didn't know whether I was glad or disappointed. "You want it. Both of us know that."

I turned away. "My room-mate's due back any minute."

"You told me she was gone until tomorrow morning."

I'd forgotten. His remembering had made the whole thing seem twice as stupid.

"I could make you like it," he added quietly.

"That's what I like about you, Blake—your overwhelming modesty."

He laughed. "Part of my charm."

"Do you *really* think you're charming?" I was honestly curious.

"When I want to be," he answered frankly.

I had to agree. I'd seen it. I'd seen it with anyone who could do the company any good. His boss was due to retire next year and Blake would move up; he'd be the youngest department head in the company. Blake Gelezio, Public Relations. *Mr.* Gelezio; it was what he expected to be called. Anyone a rung or so below him was first-name—anyone in authority was *Mister*. And soon, *he'd* be in authority. What the hell? In a year, he could probably use his influence to get me a raise. We were in different departments, but his salary was already way above what the guy I worked for was getting—so I guess that made Blake more important. Or, at least I was sure *Blake* would see it that way.

I moved onto the couch. "Rain's letting up."

"Yeah." He let out a deep breath. "Ellie—I—I'll go if you really want me to."

His raincoat was hanging on the outside of the closet beside mine. The carpet had little dark spots where a water had dripped. He grabbed the coat, then hesitated. "You're a nice kid."

I glanced up, surprised. "You just spent the evening telling me I *wasn't* a kid—how I was getting old and decrepit."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't mean it."

"Then why the hell did you say it?"

"I wanted to be sure."

"Sure about *what*?"

"You," he answered simply. "You *said* you—you'd never—anyway, I wanted to be sure."

"Why?"

"I was curious. There aren't many girls like you. I—

I wouldn't do anything to change it. Like I said, you're a nice kid."

At first, I could hardly keep my face straight. Then I stopped trying. "You lousy liar!"

"*Huh?*" He looked uncomfortable.

I laughed. "You mean you *couldn't* do anything to change it. You tried—I've never *seen* anybody try so hard."

"Now wait a minute——"

"Sure. Go ahead. I can always use a good laugh."

His face got scarlet.

"Go ahead," I prodded. "Tell me all about lover boy Gelezio's sudden streak of conscience and charity." I knew it wasn't fair. It wasn't *his* fault he was the one I wanted; it wasn't his fault anymore than it was mine. Heaven only knew he'd done nothing to encourage me. I laughed, just thinking about it. He'd insulted me—pawed me—hammy as hell. It was the 'paws' I'd liked—not the guy they belonged to or the way he used them. Sure, I'd wanted him to touch me, but not *like* that; not like a dirty little kid gulping an ice cream cone. I'd wanted the kids in the magazine ads, all clean and sweet with some degree of appreciation, not slobbering with self-righteous greed.

Appreciation; maybe that was what I'd wanted—not as though I were doing him a favor, but to at least feel that going to bed with me meant more to *him* than a free drink or elegant dinner on the expense account.

I tried to imagine how the evening would have gone if I'd been in a position to do him some good at the company; if my boss had been one of the vice-presidents instead of poor old Mr. Lewis in the shipping department.

His face was still scarlet, lips thin. "I could have you fired."

"After eight years? I doubt it."

"I don't."

"You're changing the subject." I laughed. "Besides, surely you wouldn't want anybody thinking that *that* was how lover-boy Gelezio made his conquests—by holding an axe over the poor little secretary's head."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it!"

"Excuse me," I offered with overdrawn politeness, "I guess I'm not very bright. Just what *did* you mean?"

"I——" He broke off and looked at me like he was finally feeling about me as I'd felt about him all evening. I'd known what he meant—not that he'd have me fired; he'd been telling me in his own quaint way that his name was *Mr. Gelezio*.

The doorbell rang. I turned my head and called, "Come in——"

Blake looked startled. "Who is it?"

"If I knew things like that without looking, I'd be wasting my time as a secretary."

It rang again.

I got up. "It's locked. I forgot."

I opened the door. It was Dave Kelly from across the hall. He grinned. "Hi. Got a cigarette?"

I smiled. "I thought you quit."

"I did. Six times."

I laughed. "Come on in."

Blake was still holding his raincoat. I nodded towards him. "Dave—Blake Gelezio. Blake—Dave Kelly."

Dave stuck out his hand. "Hi."

Blake took it with a side glance at me. "Glad to know you."

I tried to keep my face straight. Blake's glance had said, *who is he?* I knew I'd be flattering myself if I thought it was anything resembling jealousy. It was merely a question of could he do anything for the company. I found myself wondering half-consciously whether he could. I doubted it. I knew he was some kind of editor with one of the major publishing firms, but that was about all I knew. I figured he'd have to be fairly successful to afford his apartment. I knew what I was paying for a similar layout, and I split down the middle with Janet. Also, his had a view of the river; ours didn't. I knew because one evening about six months ago, I'd lost my keys, the super wasn't in and I had about an hour to kill until Janet got back. I'd been sitting on the floor in the hall for about twenty minutes when he came along and invited me in for coffee. He made a semi-pass, I turned him down and that was the end of it—except for the occasional times I saw him in the halls or, like now, when one of us wanted to borrow something.

As I looked at him now, I thought he was attractive. He was wearing a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and gray slacks. His eyes were blue, hair dark brown. I guess I'd always been attracted to him, but from the parade of females who showed up with him at night and didn't leave until morning, I'd never hoped for a second look from him. Only now it was different; now my reasons for turning him down and everybody else—those reasons

He glanced around the room. "Ciga

I laughed and grabbed them from the coffee table.
"Dave, I can't let you *do* this to yourself!"

He held out his hand. "Come on!"

"How long has it been?"

"Two months, one week, four days."

I backed away, clutching the pack against my chest.
"I'm proud of you."

He made a fast lunge.

I ducked and ran behind one of the chairs. "I just want you to think it over—this is nothing for a snap decision——"

"It's *not* a snap decision."

"You *sure*?"

He dropped his arms to his side and grinned.
"Honey, I have been thinking of nothing else for two months, one week and four days!"

I laughed. "Okay." I tossed him the pack.

Blake had his lighter all ready. I should have expected it; it was the 'public relations' thing to do. Dave looked pleasantly surprised. He took a deep drag and smiled. "Thanks." I knew it was an act, but for some reason, I was glad Dave didn't. Maybe if he thought someone as smooth and charming as Blake was interested in me, there might be something about me worth noticing. Only I knew it was a pipe dream. Dave wanted one thing from a woman—and I'd already said no. I began wondering whether all men were like that—at least all the attractive ones who were old enough for me and not married. Maybe that was the key to the Cinderella story—the hidden gimmick—the thorn with the rose; Cinderella was not twenty-seven years old.

He was still holding the pack. "Hey, this all you have?"

I smiled. "No. You can keep them."

"I'll get you some more."

"You don't have to."

He laughed. "The way I keep quitting and running over here, it could get expensive."

He headed for the door with a nod to both of us. "So long."

Blake smiled. "Nice meeting you."

He closed the door. I looked at Blake and smiled sarcastically. "Was it *really* nice meeting him?"

"Who is he?"

"Want to know something funny? I *thought* you'd ask that question!"

"Yeah, that's a regular side-splitting joke. Who is he?"

"Head of the Department of Sanitation. Think of the lighter fuel you wasted."

He grabbed my wrist, swinging me around so I was facing him. He kissed me, hard and rough, then dropped his arms. "So long, redhead."

I closed my eyes, still feeling his lips against mine. He'd been rough. Maybe that was why Blake had come so close; maybe I *needed* somebody rough—maybe without it, I'd never have the guts to go through with it. Maybe I needed somebody I knew would ignore it if I told him to stop at the last minute. I'd been angry that he hadn't particularly cared about me, but maybe somebody who *did* care wouldn't try so hard. I looked back over the number of men who had gotten protective—protective, then bored. I thought of the

ones who'd wanted to marry me. There had been three. One of them, the first, had lived down the block from us in the small Pennsylvania town where I grew up. One of the last letters I'd received from my parents before they died three years ago had described his wedding. The second, I hadn't trusted because, in my idealistic virtue, I'd been insulted when he made a pass before he proposed and I decided that he didn't really love me—that he only proposed because all else had failed. I realized later I'd been wrong—too much later.

The third, I'd simply been unable to fall in love with. I'd been twenty-three and was still looking for the stranger on an enchanted evening. Bill had been far too solid. I suppose if I had it to do over again, he's the one I would have accepted. But Bill was also married—married with one child and another on the way. I'd run into him about four months ago and he'd greeted me like an old friend—like someone he was fond of and respected, but it didn't take anything particularly brilliant to see that the love was gone.

I looked at Blake. He turned the collar up on his coat and reached for the doorknob. In a couple seconds, he'd be gone and I'd be alone; alone in bed, wanting him, closing my eyes and wondering what it would be like to have him there beside me with his arms around me. *And why not?* It was a question I couldn't answer anymore. I wanted him. *What are you saving it for?* It was a crude question, crudely asked by the sun god, but suddenly I'd run out of answers. Okay, the movies and all the sunny little love stories in magazines were lies, but at least I could have half; half of the happy ending—the part they generally left to the reader's imagination.

CHAPTER TWO

I heard the door open; I felt it when he sat on the other side of the bed. He put his hands on my shoulders and pushed until I was lying down. I'd wanted it to be dark, but the door was ajar and the dim light from the living room filtered in.

He'd taken off the raincoat, but still had his suit jacket on. He kissed me and I knew I was tense—or maybe *scared* would be a more honest description; scared and lightheaded, almost as though I'd been drinking. I suppose it was funny—I'd been so careful *not* to drink—not when I was with Blake. This was our third date. I remembered back to the days when I was sixteen and made it a point never to kiss a boy before the third date. I smiled. How times change!

I watched while he got out of his jacket; how the material of his shirt pulled tight across his chest when he stretched his arms.

He tossed it on the floor and stretched out beside me. He touched my breast and I started to stop him; conditioned reflex, I guess. He ignored me and went

on as though I hadn't done anything. I closed my eyes. Yes, that was good. He wouldn't stop. No matter what I said or did, this was really it.

I felt like I was watching from some great distance. *So this is what happens after the fadeouts*, I kept thinking, *okay—show me what's next.*

He propped himself up on one elbow and began unbuttoning my blouse. I looked at his face. It was intense and I wondered what he was thinking. I wondered what he'd think if he could read *my* thoughts. There was an old woman who lived in a shoe; she had so many children because she didn't know any better. Didn't know what to do. Only *Blake* knew. One thing I'd never heard about Blake Gelezio was that he'd gotten any of his girls pregnant.

He opened the blouse and pressed his hands against my breasts. He grabbed my shoulders and then I was sitting up, the blouse somewhere between us, his fingers yanking at the straps on my bra and slip. "Take it easy, will you?"

"Well dammit, you *could* help——"

First I was startled, then I laughed. "That's what I like about you, Blake—your tender sensitivity."

"Save it for some other guy."

"Save *what*?"

"The smart cracks."

"You really hate me, don't you?" I felt like laughing, then suddenly wondered whether I was hysterical. "*Ouch——*" He was yanking at the bra and he'd pulled so hard it hurt.

He dropped his hands. "You do it." He wiped the sleeve of his shirt over his forehead and it was the first time I noticed how much he was sweating.

he'd succeeded, but at this particular moment, *I* was the one who was coming out ahead.

Only not very far—I knew if I didn't finish the job, he would.

I sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off the girdle. It struck me funny; a girdle is such an unromantic piece of clothing.

He grabbed me around the waist and pulled me down beside him. Then his hands were all over me and who the hell cared if he was crude and rough and didn't give a damn about anything except the sex?

He yanked my slip up over my waist, then grabbed at my panties and that was when I got so scared I was afraid I'd start screaming. "*Don't—*" I was trying so hard to keep it from sounding hysterical, it came out low and almost inaudible.

He was fixing his own clothes, hands trembling, and I looked away.

"Don't *what?*"

"Don't—"

He hooked his thumbs under the elastic of my panties and yanked them off before I could do much about it. The tension in my thighs cried for release, but through pleasure, not pain and the roughness of his hands made promises which terrified me. Fear and helplessness mingled with desire and locked forces in a wave of nausea that swelled then passed—and I gave silent thanks that it passed! My breasts ached with pent-up longing: I wanted him to touch my breasts as he had earlier. *Give me a chance, I thought, don't let it be like this!*

I tried twisting my legs, but I don't think he even

miliation would be the worst part of sleeping with a man I wasn't married to. Or maybe I was jumping to conclusions—maybe it *would* be the worst part, only that was for the future. For now—for this moment, what mattered—what *really* mattered was the *disappointment!*

So *all* of it was lies. Not just the happy ending, but the implications of what came afterwards. I wondered how Cinderella must have felt—or Sleeping Beauty—or Snow White.

I wished he'd go home. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

He put his hand on my shoulder and I checked a sudden impulse to pull away. It would be too melodramatic; he might take it as the wronged little virgin being angry with the big bad wolf. I added Red Riding Hood to my list of disappointed princesses, then crossed her off. No, Red Riding Hood had been spared the fate of the others.

The lump in my throat was so solid I thought I'd start choking. I'm still not even sure why I cared, but it mattered that Blake shouldn't see me cry. Maybe I was afraid he'd laugh at me. Maybe the humiliation was setting in and, with it, a vulnerability to how stupid I'd look lying there with tears wetting the pillow case, still wearing my slip and bra, naked from the waist down. I wanted to pull down the slip and the idea struck me as comical; as though I were still concerned that he shouldn't see me. Everything else was all right as long as he didn't look.

"Ellie——"

"What?" My lips were shaking. I felt like I could

manage it for the rest of my life to never ask for anything else if only I could keep from crying just this once.

He looked concerned. "Hey, I—I'm sorry if I hurt you *that* much——"

"You didn't——"

"Oh come *on*—you're *crying*."

"I am *not* crying!" Only it wasn't true anymore. I rolled onto my stomach and grabbed the pillow.

He laid his hand on my back. "Hey, it's nothing to get *that* shook up about——"

I sat up and yanked down my slip, then faced him. "That's what I like about you, Blake—your overwhelming sensitivity and understanding."

"Look, it was the first time. You can't expect it to be *perfect*."

"And you'd know, wouldn't you? You'd know all about it."

He sounded annoyed. "Maybe I'm just stupid, honey, but I don't get it."

"Yeah, maybe you *are* stupid!" I was sorry as soon as I'd said it. It had that same ring of the dishonored virgin I'd been so worried about before. I don't know why I even *cared* what he thought and, maybe by tomorrow, I wouldn't—but now—for this moment, it mattered one hell of a lot.

His eyes narrowed. "Don't give me that—you're no naive high school kid."

"Don't give you *what*?"

"Like it was all my fault."

I was really batting a thousand. First the tears, now he was thinking exactly what I hadn't wanted him to.

"No," I answered quietly, "I don't think it was your

fault. I don't think *any* of it was your fault." I meant it. If it hadn't been Blake, it would have been someone else and I'd be kidding myself if I didn't admit it. At least now it was over. With someone else, I might have been able to stop them—stop them and never see them again, which would mean I'd have to start all over from the beginning with somebody else.

"It can be better—it *will* be better."

"Yeah—sure."

He leaned over me. I think he was planning to kiss me, and I jerked my head away.

"What the hell is this? You mad?"

"No, I'm not mad. Okay?"

"No, it's *not* okay. You act like I committed some sort of crime."

I bit my lip, then propped myself up on my elbow, facing him. "Look, I'm not angry. I don't blame you. It's just—it's what you said, it wasn't very good for me. Maybe you're right—maybe it *can* be better——" It was certainly worth thinking about. Seemed there'd *have* to be more to it than that; a lie *that* big couldn't have survived for so many centuries.

He touched my breast and I pushed him away.

"But not tonight," I concluded.

He looked disappointed. "But Ellie, honey—*baby*——"

"No," I cut in flatly.

He sat up. "When?"

"I—I'll call you."

"I don't believe you."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Ellie——" He moved his arms around me, and I liked it. I found myself wanting *him* to touch me; to

start everything all over again, only I knew it wouldn't lead anywhere—at least not anywhere I wanted to go. The thrill of his touch; the excitement of his hands against my body—maybe I should have left it there, but no—not me; I'd had to know *all* of it. At least before, I'd been able to dream about him—to believe it might be wonderful to wake up in the night and find his arms around me.

I shoved him away and stood up. "I said *no*."

"I don't like to leave it like this."

"Obviously."

"I don't want you to think I——" He broke off. At first I didn't get it; then the dawn came up like thunder. I started to smile, but checked myself—fast. That would be all I'd need—for him to think I was laughing at him. "Blake," I began gently, "I don't think—I mean, I don't think anything was your fault. It was *me*, not you." At least I *thought* so. Maybe it would have been better if he'd been more gentle, but I honestly didn't know. Besides, I'd expected something automatic; like pulling a switch and a light goes on.

Anyway, if he *had* been more gentle—if he'd given me any kind of a choice, I probably would have backed out.

I thought of Dave across the hall. I wondered whether it would be the same with him. Maybe it was all the same. Oh sure, the buildup and the words would be different—they were all separate people, but in the last moment; in the final reach-for-a-star analysis, there was nothing but restlessness and sweat.

He got his clothes back in order. I hadn't noticed

that he hadn't already done it until I saw him turn away and take care of it.

He straightened his tie. I remembered him asking me what was so unusual about taking off my clothes—didn't I do it every night? I suddenly got a picture of him every morning, selecting a tie then putting it on and straightening it like he was doing now.

He grabbed his jacket and slipped into it. There was a white thread clinging to the sleeve. He lifted it off with two delicate fingers, balled it up and tossed it onto the floor. Then he pulled out his comb and ran it through his hair; the corn silk hair of the sun god. "Do I have lipstick on my face?"

I'm not sure why, but the question irritated me. "I can't see. The light's too dim." Maybe it was that in a way, I felt as though he were brushing *me* off—not that he didn't want to see me again, more as though I'd meant about as much to him as a small thread on his sleeve or a lipstick smear.

He walked out of the room. I picked up a robe and waited in the doorway. The light in the bathroom flicked on. I took about eight steps and could see him standing in front of the mirror, carefully removing the lipstick with a kleenex. His eyes met mine reflected in the mirror. He smiled. It was almost as good as the 'public relations' smile he might give a reporter and I suppose I should have been flattered, but somehow, I just couldn't manage it.

He walked out and started for the door.

"You forgot your raincoat," I offered quietly.

"Huh? Oh, thanks——" He went back to the ~~chair~~ and grabbed it.

I smiled. "At least it's stopped raining—you won't drown."

He looked like he didn't quite know how to take it. I left it up to his own judgement.

He got into the coat then walked out.

I stood staring at the couch and waited until I heard the door close behind him.

I went into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. Then I lay down, doubled my legs up against my stomach and cried for a long time.

I got up about an hour later and took a shower. My eyes were swollen and red. I tied my hair back and slapped cold cream over my face—thick enough that by morning, I knew the skin would look soft.

How quickly the years had gone! My complexion was drying and I wasn't being neurotic about the little lines around my eyes—they were really there. I stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror. My breasts were still firm and my waist was thin. My thighs were a little heavier than I wanted them to be and I decided I'd better start getting off the bus two or three stops early and walking the rest of the way as I'd done in other periods of sudden self-consciousness over the results of sitting most of the day.

I smiled. It was still a good body—like the cover girls on pin-up magazines, except for my thighs from certain angles.

I got into a pair of pajamas and went back to bed. I thought of Blake—how he'd been lying where I was lying now.

I closed my eyes. It was a long time before sleep came.

I woke up the next morning when Janet came in. She

parked on the edge of the bed and shook me.
"Hey——"

I rolled over and opened my eyes. "Huh? Oh, hi——"

"What a lazy way to spend a Saturday! You should be up and out for your morning constitutional!"

I laughed. "You take it for me."

She smiled. "Ellie, he's so cute——"

"Huh—oh, you mean the baby."

Janet had a married sister out in Queens with a new baby—I guess he was about four months old. It was where she'd spent the night. Janet was twenty-two with an honest naivete that sometimes seemed like an act to people who didn't know her. Charlie, her steady boyfriend was finishing college under the GI bill and it was understood that someday in the nebulous future, after he'd graduated, they'd be married and move to either Brooklyn or Queens and raise a happily little family like in all the magazine ads for household products. What she lacked in the brain department, she more than made up for in simple good-heartedness. I knew she and Charlie weren't sleeping together: he loved her far too much to hurt her and Janet was the kind of girl who *would* be hurt by an affair. Her parents lived way out in the wild country of Brooklyn, but through training in her secretarial school and a fairly long association with city people, she'd managed to avoid what is commonly known as a Brooklyn accent. Charlie was a student at NYU. She'd met him at a party about two years ago.

She grinned. "Last week, he looked like a ~~man~~ but he's getting to look more and more like a ~~man~~. It's amazing how fast they change."

I yawned. "What time is it?"

"Almost noon. How was your date last night?"

I smiled, dryly. "It was quite a date."

She sounded excited. "You liked him, huh?"

"Well I didn't say *that*——"

She shook her head. "Honestly, Ellie, you should get yourself a steady fella so you could settle down. You don't want to be a secretary *forever*."

"Thanks for telling me."

Her face got serious. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I sat up. "Besides, it was only Blake Gelezio."

"The blonde guy? He's cute."

"Well I wouldn't say he's exactly '*cute*'——"

She stood up. "Oh, you know what I mean."

I smiled. "Yeah, I guess I do."

She flopped back onto the bed. "Hey, I'm seeing Charlie tonight—I could ask him to bring a friend."

"Janet——"

She looked guilty. "Yeah?"

"You're feeling sorry for me."

"No I'm not. Frank liked you a lot—remember?"

I smiled. "Yeah, I remember." Frank had been Janet's first and last attempt at matchmaking for me through Charlie. Charlie and Frank had been in the army together. Frank was a Brooklyn police detective, only not like the ones in the movies. He was sharp, blunt, insensitive and one of the most-logical human beings I'd ever met. I smiled. He'd shown such respect for me because I was a 'nice' girl. He'd ever called me twice for other dates, but I'd turned him down. I remembered how I'd been attracted to him—like Blake, only it hadn't been as strong. I remembere

how I'd kept wishing he'd keep his mouth shut and put his arms around me, only at that time, I'd been twenty-five and on guard against that kind of thing so there'd been no sense in ever seeing him again. Twenty-five; it was when I'd first started to wonder with some degree of uneasiness what was delaying Prince Charming, but there was still hope.

I wondered how I'd feel about him now. I remembered how black his hair had been and how there'd been the shadow of a beard by the time we came back home. I tried to picture his reaction if I made a pass at him—or encouraged him to make one at me. I knew damn well he'd been around. I knew how strongly I'd been attracted. There was a masculinity about him that a girl could feel clear across a room.

“What about Frank? Charlie ever hear from him?”

CHAPTER THREE

"Sure."

I shook my head. "They were an unlikely team."

She seemed surprised. "Why? They were in the army together."

"Yeah, but that doesn't necessarily make people friends. I mean, *aside* from the army, what have they got in common? A college student majoring in pharmacy and a police detective. And besides, there are times when Frank's grammar slips——"

She looked at me seriously. "Ellie, you expect too much. Frank's a nice guy."

"Frank's a *tough* guy. I'd hate to have him arrest me."

She laughed. "Charlie told me Frank said his first toy was a switchblade—that while other kids were playing 'pin the tail on the donkey', he was playing 'stab the kids down the block'."

I was curious. "Frank really get in that kind of trouble when he was a kid?"

She shook her head. "He always tried to stay clear

of it. Anyway, maybe that's one reason he's good for the kind of work he does—maybe he remembered how *he* used to think." She smiled. "Besides, you liked him."

I nodded. "It was fun." I remembered how we'd gone to a lot of crazy places in Greenwich Village that Charlie knew; none of the tourist traps. Then we'd driven to Brooklyn and taken the Staten Island Ferry. I kept remembering how Janet and Charlie kept holding hands like a couple of high school kids, and Frank had told me how nice it was to be with a girl who didn't want to go someplace and get drunk.

She perked up. "Hey, I could ask Charlie to call him and see if he's free——"

"No, forget it. He's probably already got a date. It's Saturday——"

"I could find out."

"He wouldn't want to see me, honey. It's been two years——"

"He really liked you, Ellie. Charlie says sometimes he asks about you."

I was skeptical. "How recently?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

I thought about it. It had sure been a lot of fun—even if I hadn't liked Frank, it was fun watching Charlie and Janet bat each other like a couple of puppies, laughing and thoroughly enjoying just being alive and together. And I *had* liked Frank. If nothing else, he'd been different. I'd been annoyed by the physical attraction I'd felt, but the evening had still turned into something worth remembering.

I threw back the covers and got out of bed. "Okay—call him."

I went into the bathroom and rinsed off what was left of the cold cream. I looked sleepy, but at least my eyes weren't all swollen and red from the crying.

I was getting dressed when the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," called Janet.

"Okay."

I heard the door open and I heard Janet say "Hi." Whoever it was, she'd sounded like she was glad to see them, but then Janet *always* sounded that way unless it was someone she couldn't stand, and she generally made that reaction equally obvious.

I pulled my sweater down over the slacks and checked my make-up. The make-up every day, even when I wasn't planning to do much except sit around the apartment, had also been added within the last two years. It was usually just powder and something to lighten the circles under my eyes plus pale lipstick and eyebrow pencil. I took a second look and wondered how much the circles were real and how much imagined. At least my complexion was still good: dry, but smooth. I also knew that if I really wanted to, I could make myself look about twenty, but that took one hell of a lot of time. Besides, after one or two drinks towards the end of the evening, I found I'd generally gained a few years, but what the hell? I was still pretty—I'd even been told I was beautiful. I knew my *hair* was beautiful; shoulder length soft auburn with copper highlights. I knew there were those who suspected I got it out of a bottle, but it wasn't true.

I heard a masculine voice asking for me and I walked into the living room. "Who is it?"

"Dave from across the hall," answered Janet. She

Besides, I liked Dave and this way I was at least a person to him—a person I felt *he* liked. On the other hand, maybe his whole bedroom harem also consisted of people—or at least maybe some of them still retained some degree of his respect. I simply didn't know that much about it—not just sex, but what kind of relationship grew from it outside the bedroom.

The phone rang and Janet answered with that really special 'Hi' that paled all the others by comparison and I knew it was Charlie.

I got up and went out to the kitchen. She kept her voice low, but every now and then, it got loud, excited and full of laughter.

I scrambled some eggs and made myself a cup of coffee.

It was at least twenty minutes before her head appeared at the kitchen doorway, all smiles. "He says it's okay—about Frank, I mean."

"It took twenty minutes for him to tell you *that*?"

She laughed and sat down. "They'll pick us up around six."

"Okay."

It was ten after six when the downstairs buzzer sounded. Janet was off like a rabbit, pushing it about two seconds after it rang. I laughed. "Haven't you ever heard of playing hard to get?"

She looked surprised. "With *Charlie*?"

I smiled. "Never mind."

She was wearing a yellow jersey dress with a flared skirt and looked about as pretty as I'd ever seen her. I was wearing a white sweater and a beige fitted-skirt. I had a jacket that matched the skirt and it made a nice

outfit—perfect for the crazy, changeable September weather. Janet had an orlon sweater that was somehow just the wrong shade of brown for the dress, but what the heck? To Charlie, it would be beautiful.

She had the door open before they had a chance to ring the bell. I waited in the living room, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

They walked in. Both of them were wearing slacks and sport jackets. I suddenly wondered whether men called each other up and asked what they were planning to wear like girls did in high school. Probably not.

I looked at Frank and smiled. I'd forgotten how much I'd liked him—or maybe it was just that I'd never given myself a real chance before. "Hi—"

He nodded. "Hiya."

I looked at his face, his shoulders and found myself feeling everything I'd felt before, only stronger. I wondered whether it was due to Blake and last night—or maybe it was because of the years that had gone by. I knew I'd been changed by the years, even before I'd had anything much to do with Blake.

Janet was talking a mile a minute and Charlie was standing there with that same patient, tender smile I'd been so conscious of the first time I saw them together.

Frank slipped his arm around my shoulders and we walked into the hall. I felt a tremor up my spine when he touched me, and found myself gritting my teeth. I didn't want it to be like this—not so soon or so strong. I wondered what it would have been like if he'd been the one I was seeing as often as I'd seen Blake around the office; I wondered whether it would have been Frank instead of Blake last night. How different it would have been! I somehow just couldn't picture

I felt uncomfortable. "I was busy."

"I think you're lying."

I laughed. "Good heavens, is that how you talk to your suspects?"

He smiled. "Sometimes."

"Tell me all about it. Ever beat up anyone you were questioning?"

"Sure—constantly."

"Now *you're* lying."

"So if you already knew the answer, why did you ask?"

"But I *don't* already know."

"You just said I was lying. That presupposes you know what's true."

"I give up."

"On what?"

"Oh trying to say anything to you that isn't absolutely logical and thoroughly thought out."

He laughed and tightened his arm around me. Our thighs were touching and I wondered whether he was as conscious of it as I was.

"Tell me, Mr. Detective, do women ever throw themselves at you like in the movies?"

He looked startled. "I beg your pardon——"

"*You* know—so you won't take them in."

He laughed. "Not very often. It doesn't work that way."

"What do you mean?"

"Huh?"

"*What* doesn't work that way?"

"My job—it's not like in the movies. At least not like in *most* movies."

ing—as usual. It was usually on unrelated subjects, hopping back and forth so fast it was sometimes hard to keep up with her. The one train of continuity was that most of it was set off by things she saw. A fat woman came in with a tall, skinny guy and it reminded her of the woman who'd lived next door to them in

at you, you said 'not very often'. Does that mean sometimes they do?"

"What's the difference?" he asked awkwardly.

"I'm embarrassing you. I'm sorry."

"No, you're not embarrassing me. Yeah, sometimes I get offers. Like I said, not very often. It just doesn't work that way."

"Ever take any of them up on it?"

"Huh?" He looked at me curiously and I told myself to shut up. I suppose it would have been better if he'd told me to mind my own damn business—I deserved it. I suppose I'd been trying to vicariously hop in bed with him without realizing it and now *I* was the one who felt awkward and self-conscious.

I changed the subject and hoped it wasn't too obvious. "Why do you and Charlie like each other—you're so different."

"He's a nice guy."

"But what do you talk about with him?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "How do you sum up conversations? Sometimes we talk about guns—both of us are interested. He's studying pharmacy—sometimes chemicals figure in on a case. He talks about Janet—I like listening—I like *her*."

"Most people do. She is the most incredibly naive—"

He laughed. "Yeah, I know. When I first met her, I thought it was an act. Charlie assured me it wasn't and I figured he'd *really* been taken——"

They pulled into a parking lot and we followed.

It was a nice restaurant; wood-paneled walls, moderate prices and good food. Janet did most of the talk-

ing—as usual. It was usually on unrelated subjects, hopping back and forth so fast it was sometimes hard to keep up with her. The one train of continuity was that most of it was set off by things she saw. A fat woman came in with a tall, skinny guy and it reminded her of the woman who'd lived next door to them in Brooklyn, so we heard all about the woman next door—how funny and wonderful she was. I suppose if the words she said were written down, it would make pretty dull reading, but the *way* she said it made all of it alive and it was fun listening. Also, there was something about her when she was with Charlie; something that changed her from a cute little girl into a beautiful woman. I suppose it was funny that I thought of her as a little girl—she was only five years younger than I was.

Five years. I tried to remember what *I'd* been like five years ago; could I ever have been as young and bright-eyed as she was now? I suppose if it hadn't been for her absolute trust in me—and just about everybody else, as far as that goes, I might have been jealous. It was somehow a feeling I'd never quite mustered; she wouldn't have understood it.

I thought of how patiently Charlie was waiting for the day when they'd be married. He was one year older than I was and apparently he'd given up all female companionship except Janet and Janet was hardly taking care of his more physical inclinations. I remembered feeling that he was attractive the first time I met him. I'd wound up feeling guilty even *thinking* about it.

Frank was thirty-two. I glanced at him and won-

I wondered what was *Frank's* idea of a date when he was on his own. I somehow doubted that it was the same as Charlie and Janet's.

We climbed back into the cars and he put his arm around me again.

It felt good.

CHAPTER FOUR

Coney Island had changed—or maybe *I'd* changed. For one thing, it seemed dirtier and most of the signs could have used more than a little paint.

The people seemed different too—with a loneliness so thick it startled me. *Amusement park?*—maybe it should have been called an *escape* park. Escape into laughter! Even if the laughter didn't come from any particularly deep inner spring. Escape into a swarming crowd of strangers where nobody knew your shortcomings and failures and heartaches.

Janet seemed delighted. I shook my head. Maybe it *was* me. I took Frank's hand and held on. I wished we hadn't come.

She pointed to the nearest roller coaster. "I want to go on that!"

I shuddered. "Not me."

"I'll pass," said Frank.

She grabbed Charlie's hand. "Come on!"

"Now wait a minute, take it easy——" He looked at Frank. "Where do you want to meet?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "How about on the other side of the ticket booth?"

"Okay—when?"

He hesitated. "Oh hell, might as well make it about an hour. I'm assuming you'll be hooked for about half the rides here."

He nodded. "Ugh."

Janet laughed.

Frank checked his watch. "It's almost nine. We'll meet you at ten."

"Okay."

They left with Janet practically running and Charlie slowing her down.

Frank shook his head. "She's changed that guy."

"Really? How?"

"If you'd known him when I first met him, you'd see it. He's had a pretty rough time—lousy parents—the whole bit. Also, he was engaged when he went into the service. She married somebody else while he was gone."

"That's rough——"

"Yeah—but at least it wasn't too late when he met Janet." He looked at me, hands on his hips. "Well—what do you want to do? I could probably win you a teddy bear or something."

"Hey, you probably *could*—one of those shooting galleries."

He nodded.

I took his hand. "I think there are a gang of them up on the boardwalk—unless it's changed," I added quietly.

"This place never changes—not really."

"You like it?"

"I used to go swimming here when I was a kid. Sometimes we couldn't make the subway fare, so we'd hitch a ride."

"Who's *we*?"

"Huh? Oh, my brother."

"I didn't know you had a brother."

"Kid brother. He was killed in Korea."

"I'm sorry——"

"Forget it. Come on."

We started towards the boardwalk.

He pulled out a cigarette pack, discovered it was empty and tossed it away. "I need another pack."

There was a concession stand a few feet ahead. It was mobbed.

"You wait here," he said, walking off.

I stood and waited, feeling suddenly self-conscious as soon as he'd left. I glanced around and tried to keep my eyes from meeting the eyes of any unattached male. I could see him fighting his way past the edges of the crowd, then disappearing inside. I knew he was being considerate when he'd left me here, but somehow I still wished he hadn't.

"Well, *hiya*, gorgeous!"

It came from behind me and I swung around. There were three of them; all about eighteen-years-old with shoulders like construction workers. At first I thought they'd been drinking, but then I realized that wasn't it—it was something else.

"You all alone?" It came from a tall blond. His hair reminded me of Blake, but that was all.

I started towards the concession stand, but one of them stepped in front of me. "What's the rush?"

I put my hands on my hips. I suppose it was stupid, but I was mad. "Are you crazy? Let me alone."

He nudged his friend and grinned. "Hey Pete, the lady wants to know if I'm crazy. Am I?"

"Who, *you*? No, not you!"

"No, I'm not crazy."

"Look, this place is jammed. All I've got to do is raise my voice——"

"And what? Some fuzz going to come runnin'? Hey, Pete, you see any fuzz?"

He shook his head. "Not me."

The whole thing was fantastic—like something out of a 'B' movie. It was all so unreal, I somehow couldn't manage to get scared. At least that was what I'd thought—until one of them touched me. He put his hand on my back and I found myself looking around for a cop. There'd been at least half a dozen a couple minutes ago.

"Now you ain't going to raise your voice, are you? Not a nice girl like you. Come on. Let's take a little walk."

My hands were shaking. How long does it take to buy one lousy pack of cigarettes? Only maybe even Frank wouldn't be enough. Sure, he'd know how to come out ahead in a fight, but there were *three* of them and—as I'd said before, there was something wrong with them. Maybe it was drugs. I'd never seen a drug addict. Or maybe I was just imagining it.

He shoved me.

I waited for an opening, then started to run, but it was no good—the tall one got in front of me, holding out his arms like it was some kind of game. At least two passersby gave it a second look, but that was all.

I wondered whether they'd keep on passing by if I started screaming. They'd already told me not to, but I couldn't think which would be worse—to start yelling and have them start swinging or to go with them. Maybe if I went with them, there'd be a cop somewhere along the way.

"Come on, sweetie—*move*."

He pushed me and I almost lost my balance. "All *right*——"

I'd taken about two steps when I saw Frank coming back. First he looked startled, then it seemed like he'd sized things up accurately. I wondered whether any other man I'd ever met would have caught on so quickly. One of them did a funny little dance step then let out a loud laugh and I suddenly wondered whether they were really *crazy*.

Frank stepped in front of us. His face was so serious it frightened me. "Okay," he announced calmly, "You're under arrest."

'Pete' looked like it was the funniest thing that had happened to him all week. "*Arrest?* What's the charge?"

"Kidnapping," he answered dryly. "I might even be able to throw in possession of narcotics."

The tall one stepped in front of him, fists clenched. "Beat it, sonny—your mother's calling you."

"Frank, look out!" Only I didn't have to say it. I'd hardly gotten the words out before his fist had landed in the guy's stomach. The rest of it went so fast I hardly remember, but I do still have a clear picture of one of them flying over Frank's back and letting out an animal-like shriek when he hit the ground. Then two of them were just about out. The third tried

"But—but they must have been *insane*. They'd never have gotten away with it!"

"They weren't thinking that far ahead. They were hopped-up—you know—drugs."

"How do you know?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "It was obvious—did you notice their eyes?"

"No. Why didn't the police ask me to sign anything?"

"It'll depend on what the DA wants to charge them with. If they have any of the stuff on them, it'll probably be possession of narcotics."

"I thought you said it was kidnapping."

"Technically, it was."

"But they didn't——"

"Honey, they moved you where you didn't want to. That's kidnapping."

We were almost to the car. It was dark where we'd parked it, overlooking the water. There were several other cars at a discreet distance with couples who were necking.

He unlocked the door and I climbed inside. He moved in behind the wheel.

I stretched out my legs. "You're quite a hero. Three at one blow!"

I looked at him and saw he was blushing. "Cut it out, okay?"

"I'm sorry. Frank, I *am* sorry. I wasn't laughing at you. And I was awfully glad to see you—back there, I mean."

"Okay."

I shook my head. "It didn't happen. It *couldn't* have happened."

He smiled. "Forget it."

"I'm sure I never will." I shuddered. He slipped his arm around me and I cuddled about as close as I could get. I looked at him and he seemed self-conscious. Then I remembered last time—how I'd sat on the other side of the seat and pointedly not even given him the opportunity to *try* to kiss me. Maybe it was partly because I'd been afraid—afraid I might feel what I was feeling now. I knew he wasn't very subtle. I wondered how strong a hint it would take. I touched his cheek—gently, and looked into his eyes when he faced me. He seemed surprised; I guess it wouldn't take much of a hint at all!

He kissed me and I was close to amazed by the gentleness of it. Then I decided he was probably still being 'polite'. Only it wasn't what I wanted.

I threw my arms around him, my fingernails digging into the back of his neck and, *this* time when our lips met, it was far from gentle. His tongue touched mine and a shudder ran through me so strong I wondered whether he'd felt it too, just from having his arms around me.

He held me for a long minute and I knew he wanted to touch me; knew he was trying hard not to.

"Honey, you *have* changed!"

"How would you know. Last time, you didn't kiss me."

"Last time, you didn't give me much chance."

"I wanted you to."

"Yeah? Well it was certainly a well-kept secret."

"I wanted you to, but I disapproved of the general idea."

"I don't get it."

"It's not important."

He kissed me again and this time, his hand moved over my breast. I wondered how much of it was a sudden desire to test and find out how far I was willing to go. I'd really underestimated him. I suppose I shouldn't have—I knew he was reasonably intelligent and probably one of the most experienced men I'd ever gone out with.

I didn't stop him. He reached under the sweater, touching me over the slip. By now, Blake would have said something, but not Frank. The strong silent type.

I broke away and sat up stiffly. I wanted to laugh and forced myself not to. It was really funny—my sitting here petting; just like the kids used to do in high school. I wondered if Frank would tell Charlie.

He pulled out a cigarette. "I don't get it," he said, a little angry.

"What?"

"You. You started it. What made you change . . ."

"I started it?!"

He laughed. "Yeah."

I tried to keep my face straight. "Maybe I got tired of waiting for *you* to start it."

"You never gave me much encouragement before."

"That was two years ago."

"I can hardly wait for two years from now!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It wasn't very nice. Forget it."

"Why aren't you married?"

"I was."

"I didn't know that. What happened? Divorce?"

"Yeah—it was a long time ago."

"How long?"

He shrugged his shoulders as though the years had made talking about it a casual occurrence. "I was nineteen—she was seventeen. It was crazy. It lasted three years."

"Never wanted to try it again?"

He laughed. "You proposing?"

"No," I answered quietly, "I was just curious."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I'm curious about *you*. Maybe it's because I've never known anyone like you before."

"If I didn't know you, I might think that was a line."

"You don't know me——"

He nodded. "But I think you're honest—you don't put on an act."

"Is that why you wanted to see me again—after last time?"

"Partly—I guess. I mean, how the h-how would I know? I just wanted to see you again."

I laughed. "That's cute——"

"What's *cute*?"

"The way you watch your language. What are you like with other women?"

"Well, honey, I wouldn't be sitting here having a conversation like this."

"No? What would you be doing?"

"That an invitation?"

"Invitation to *what*?"

He snubbed out the cigarette and took me into his arms. We kissed and this time, both of his hands moved under the sweater in the back, touching the catch on my bra. I remembered how Blake had yanked; with Frank, it was different. He had it open in about two seconds. Then one hand was resting com-

fortably on my naked breast, under the bra and slip. I wondered if he could feel how fast my heart was beating; I wondered what was going on in his mind.

"That something you practice in your spare time?"

He seemed surprised. "What?"

"Unhooking bras."

"Huh?"

"It's got three hooks and it took you all of two seconds to open it. I wonder whether I could manage it that fast."

"Well confidentially, I'm not a virgin." I was half-expecting him to add, 'are you?'

"Glad to hear it." It came out sarcastically and I knew I'd hurt him. "Tell me—what would you call this?"

"Call *what*?"

"This—what we're doing. Would you call it necking?"

He shrugged his shoulders then laughed. "I haven't used that word since I was in high school."

"But that's what you'd call it, isn't it?"

"Okay, we're necking. But this is hardly the time or place for much else."

He moved his hand back on my breast, tightening then relaxing his fingers and I closed my eyes. His hands felt good; they were lighting a fire in me. I wanted him to lower his head and kiss my breasts; I even pulled up a little to give him a hint; but I wouldn't say out loud what I wanted.

CHAPTER FIVE

Frank drew away and lit a cigarette. I could see that his fingers were trembling. At first I didn't get it, then I remembered what he'd said—that this was hardly the time or place for much more. And it was obvious he wanted more—wanted it at least as much as I did. I wondered whether he'd figured it out that I wanted to go all the way. Maybe he still wasn't sure. Maybe he simply couldn't believe it of the girl he'd dated two years ago—of Janet's room-mate. Or maybe I was reading an idealism into him that simply wasn't there. I hoped so, but somehow I doubted it. I knew that he liked me—I wanted him to go on liking me, no matter how it turned out in bed. I wanted him to care. I wondered why it mattered so much. I wondered whether I was *really* beginning to care for him—more than I'd ever dreamed I might.

That would be great! Fall in love with Frank Jelenzey. Join the long line of brokenhearted females who telephoned him and chased him. Then I decided maybe I was weaving a whole sex life for him that didn't exist

—but I kept thinking it did. Hell, why would a woman want to go to bed with a man? Should he be tender or tough—Frank was both. Whatever their preference, he had it. He also had the looks, the build—a strong personal, masculine magnetism. he hardly seemed aware of.

He glanced at his watch. "It's almost ten. We'd better get back."

I nodded.

He grinned. "Unless you want me to leave you here."

"No thanks!" I leaned over and reached for the catch on my bra. "You as good at closing them as you are at opening them?"

"Huh? Oh——" He laughed. "I don't know. I never tried it." He put his hands on my shoulders and turned my back towards him.

It took him a lot longer than two seconds. When he finally finished, he pulled the sweater down and I turned around, facing him. "That wasn't as good."

"Maybe I need more practice."

He opened the car door. We got out and he moved his arm over my shoulder.

We started walking back to the bright lights and roller coaster ticket booth.

Janet and Charlie were waiting when we got there. Janet's face was flushed. "Hi—we went on the——" A long list followed, ending with "What did *you* do?"

Frank laughed. "Sounds like you're glad you came."

She wasn't just about to be deterred. "I am. Where were you?"

"We went for a walk," he answered dryly.

Well, I suppose it was true. I looked at him and suddenly noticed a faint lipstick smear on his chin.

"Try any of the shooting galleries?" she went on.

I wondered whether Charlie had noticed the lipstick because he kicked her. She looked at him like she didn't get it, then shrugged her shoulders. "Come on. Let's try some of the booths on the boardwalk."

She took his hand and they started away. I looked at Frank. "Wait a minute——"

"Huh?"

I pulled out his handkerchief and removed the lipstick. He looked surprised when he saw the stain. "I didn't know you wore enough for any of it to come off."

"It usually doesn't."

"Usually?"

"That didn't come out right."

Charlie was almost as good as Frank with a rifle, but nowhere near him when it came to using a pistol. In any case, the guys manning the booths looked anything but unhappy when we left, richer by two plaster dolls, a teddy-bear and a live goldfish. Janet had made most of the selections. I laughed. "Where are you going to keep it?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "The goldfish, we can put in the living room."

"Okay—but not the dolls."

"Agreed!"

It was after midnight when we got back into the cars. Frank pulled out before Charlie.

"I thought we were following them," I offered casually.

"He asked me to——"

"What?"

"Pull out first." He looked at me, a dry smile touching the corners of his mouth. "I think he wants to 'neck' with her."

"She really the only girl he sees?"

"If she *wasn't*, why should I tell you? You'd tell her."

"No I wouldn't."

"Okay—yeah, she's it."

I reached over and ran my fingers through his hair.

"Cut it out."

"Why?"

"I think you know the answer to that one."

"Excuse me." I moved away.

"Did anyone ever tell you you're beautiful?"

"Not recently. Why?"

"I just wondered." He pulled out a cigarette and went on, "Everything about you. Your face, your hair—your body."

"You've never seen my body."

"I've imagined it."

"You're shocking me."

"No I'm not."

So he *had* figured it out. Congratulations! What next?

"When did you start imagining my body?"

"The first minute I saw you. Automatic reflex, I suppose."

"It would have been more gallant if you'd lied."

"I'm not gallant."

"No, I suppose you're not. It's part of your charm."

He laughed. "Now I've got 'charm'."

"What's funny?"

"I don't know—the word, I guess. Somehow I just never thought of myself as 'charming'."

"How *do* you think of yourself?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Just *me*——"

"No conceit?"

"Why should I be conceited?"

"Your work," I answered dryly, "—the way you handled those guys in the park."

"Why do you keep ribbing me about it?"

"I'm not ribbing you. I was honestly impressed. You conceited about women?"

"I think we've been through this before with the 'do they ever throw themselves at you' bit."

I leaned my head against his shoulder. "Okay."

"And cut that out."

I ran my fingers through his hair. "What?"

"You're going to get yourself raped."

"By you? Sounds exciting. I'll press charges. That is the term, isn't it?"

He laughed. "Yeah, that's the term."

I closed my eyes. How glib I'd become! I remembered other times in other years where I'd kidded along the same lines, only now it wasn't kidding—at least not in the same sense as before. I'd been so proud of my precious virtue and, after firmly establishing the fact that I had it and intended to keep it, I'd set off on little word games like the one I'd been playing with Frank. In the earlier days, they rarely made passes—they were protective, almost like Charlie was protective of Janet. I suppose the main difference was that I knew I'd go to bed with Frank and he knew it too.

He pulled up in front of the apartment building.

I thought of Blake. What if it turned out lousy, as it had with Blake?

We got into the elevator and rode up, neither of us saying anything.

But it wouldn't be tonight. It couldn't be, not with Charlie and Janet due back any moment. Or maybe Frank had taken care of that. Maybe when Charlie had asked him to pull out first, Frank had asked for a specified amount of time with me. I looked at him and wondered whether he'd done it. It would have been lousy—telling Charlie and Charlie would tell Janet. Or maybe he'd told Charlie he wanted to 'neck' with me; there it was again, that silly word.

I looked away from him and pulled out my keys. My hands were shaking and I hoped he didn't notice, realizing at the same time that he probably did.

I opened the door and we walked inside. I reached for the light, but never made it. He kicked the door closed behind us, taking me into his arms in almost the same minute and, for some insane reason, I was suddenly afraid of him. I tried to push him away, but his grip was like iron. His lips found mine and I stopped fighting. I grabbed his hair, holding as tight as I could and wondering half-consciously whether I was hurting him; maybe I wanted to. The kiss was long and deep, his hands moving all over that body he'd imagined so vividly for so long; my breasts, my thighs, my buttocks. Yeah, Frank was *tough*, okay. I remembered saying it to Janet before she'd set it up with Charlie for me to see him again.

I put my hands against his chest and shoved but it didn't do a damn bit of good. I tried to move my head

away, but his hands caught the back of my hair and held me and I suppose the whole thing looked like pretty much of an act to him because I not only let him reach me with his tongue, I opened my mouth and responded as fully as I knew how.

Only what if it turned out lousy? Even if he *had* set it up so there'd be enough time, what if it worked out as it had worked out with Blake? I wanted Frank even more—more than I'd ever dreamed I could want any man, which would make it three times as hellish to be lying in the darkness with tears on my face, fingernails dug into the pillows and screams choking in my throat because for him it was all finished and for me there was nothing left but a cold shower and trying to forget.

His hands moved under my sweater and all I could think of was what if it turned out as it had with Blake. No, not *Blake*——

I must have said his name outloud because Frank's grip became less intense.

"The name is Frank," he said quietly.

"I know it."

"You sure?"

"You sound as though you think I'm lying."

"Aren't you?"

"No." I tried again at pushing him away, and this time it worked. I let out a deep breath. "Brother, you weren't kidding."

"When?"

I snapped on the light. "When you said you were going to rape me."

"You still got your pants on."

"That's crude."

"So are you, honey. When it gets down to basic biological instincts, you're as crude as any other dame."

First I was startled; then I laughed. "Nobody ever called me a 'dame' before."

He hesitated, then smiled. "No, I guess not."

"How would *you* know?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I just don't think you've gone out with many guys like me."

"How do you mean?"

"Brought up like I was. Where are you from?"

"Pennsylvania. Small town."

"One of those little houses—with grass and trees on the back lawn?"

"There were four trees and an open fireplace. We'd invite the neighbors over and have barbequed hamburgers."

"Ever go hungry?"

"No."

"Ever run when you saw a cop?"

"No."

"Your old man ever get drunk and knock hell out of you and the old lady?"

I turned away. "Stop it, okay? You've made your point."

He sat on one of the chairs beside the table. "That's what I wanted when I got married—a house with a yard—kids. I wanted to be able to afford bicycles for them. I could, too. I make pretty good money."

"Why didn't you get married again?"

"I don't know. Things change. *I* changed."

"You unhappy?"

"No."

"Think you *will* get married again?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Want some coffee? It's a long hike back to Brooklyn."

"Okay."

I cleaned out the pot and made fresh; Charlie and Janet would probably want some, too.

It was a long minute before either of us spoke. I put an ashtray on the table then sat down and pulled out a cigarette. He reached across and lit it for me.

I took a deep drag. "Thanks."

"If it wasn't that I was substituting for some other guy, why did you say his name?"

I could feel myself blushing. "I'm sorry you took it the way you did."

"That's no answer."

"Maybe the answer's personal."

"So were the circumstances. Why did you say his name?"

"You won't believe me unless I tell you?"

"Probably not. I won't ask again."

"I——" I broke off. "I feel like an idiot."

He waited, not saying anything. He'd told me he wasn't going to ask again, and I guess he meant what he said. "All right, I'll tell you, but don't look at me."

"Huh?" He looked like he thought it was funny.

"Okay." He pulled his chair out, facing the refrigerator.

I wondered what was wrong with me. I could have told him—I'd even *intended* to, but not like this. For some crazy reason, I felt embarrassed. "Blake's a guy I went to bed with—the guy. It didn't work out very well—for me. When you were holding me out there in

the hall, I wanted you—I wanted to go to bed with you, but I was afraid it would turn out like it had turned out with Blake. I was thinking: no—not like it was with Blake. I didn't even realize I'd said his name."

He looked at me and I got the feeling that he didn't think it was funny anymore.

"It doesn't have to be like that," he said quietly.

"You don't know how it was."

"You've given me a pretty good idea."

I laughed, awkwardly and stood up. I couldn't look at him. I don't know why, but I just couldn't sit there and meet his eyes.

I felt his hands on my shoulders. I turned around and he held me close to him. Then I was crying—crying and not wanting to as much as I hadn't wanted to last night with Blake.

"I'm sorry." I laughed. "If there's one thing I've got a talent for, it's crying when I don't want to."

"Wash your face. Janet and Charlie should be back any minute."

"Did you tell him to take his time?"

He looked at me curiously. "No. Why?"

"I just wondered—how much you'd planned in advance."

"I didn't plan a damn thing."

I went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. My make-up was a mess by the time I finished. So I washed it all off. At least it was an improvement over the smeared mascara. I started for the kitchen to get my purse and he caught my arm.

I turned my head away. "Don't—"

I had visions of us getting out of bed, dressing, then putting the spread back on in three minutes. I laughed. "Janet probably *still* wouldn't get it."

"Charlie would."

The door opened and they walked in. Janet was comparatively quiet, holding his hand, leaning her head against his shoulder.

"I made fresh coffee. Want some?"

"Sure." It came from Charlie. "Only two chairs out here. Let's have it in the living room."

Frank poured while I got a container of milk from the refrigerator and set it beside the cups. We walked into the living room, each carrying two cups. They were sitting on the couch with their arms around each other in the middle of a long kiss. They jumped apart when we came in.

Frank laughed. "Haven't you two had enough of that?"

"No, unfortunately." It came out dry and I think everybody there except Janet got it.

"What do you mean?" she asked curiously.

He tightened his arm around her shoulder. "Shut up. I've got an announcement."

I sat down and lifted the coffee cup. "Okay, what's the announcement?"

"We're getting married."

"This is *news*?"

"We're getting married in January."

Frank looked surprised. "I thought you were going to finish school first."

"Oh come *on*—I've got another year."

"We picked January," cut in Janet, "because the lease runs out in December and you might not want

to stay here after I leave—or if you decide you *do*, you'll be able to get somebody else to live with—I mean, you'll have enough time."

Frank grinned. "Would I do?"

I thought of an answer of which Janet would not have approved, so I let it go. She'd already taken it as a joke.

"We're going to live in Charlie's apartment in Greenwich Village," Janet went on. "And then later we'll buy a house."

I could just picture them in two or three years. She'd have had her first baby and they'd be living in one of those little houses like Frank had described—probably in Queens near the drugstore his father owned. Or maybe Brooklyn; maybe Charlie didn't want to work for his father. I'd heard from Janet how he kept wavering over the prospect.

I thought of Frank with two kids and bicycles on the front lawn. Maybe he'd wanted it because he'd never had it, but not me. I'd grown up on it, *choked* on it—mother's sewing club, the Friday nights when we'd all go to the movies, the discussions with neighbors on which soap product got sheets cleanest. It might be great for Janet and Charlie and Frank, but not me. I wanted—I broke off. I didn't *know* what I wanted. For so many years, I'd thought it was Prince Charming, but now I knew he was a fable. Unfortunately, it left quite a vacuum—a vacuum I'd tried to fill with Blake Gelezio and Frank would be next.

CHAPTER SIX

We finished the coffee and, for a change, Frank and Charlie did most of the talking—about mutual car troubles. Frank was the one who stood up and started for the door first. I went with him. Janet and Charlie were still in the living room. I heard her break off in the middle of a sentence and guessed Charlie was kissing her. Frank and I were alone by the door. He moved his arms around me and I turned my face away. "Don't——"

He put his hand under my chin and forced my head back up until our lips were almost touching.

"Don't," I whispered, "It—it'll start everything all over again."

He kept it gentle—short and sweet, but I could feel my fists clench, wanting to hold him, wishing we were alone——

He let go of me and Janet was standing there with Charlie looking so surprised, both of us laughed.

They left and Janet turned around, facing me. "You let him *kiss* you!"

I walked into the living room and sat on the couch.
"Yeah, I guess I did."

"Hey, you really like him, huh?"

It seemed somehow that I was re-living a conversation I might have had when I was sixteen. "Yes, I really like him," I answered quietly.

I got up and went into the bedroom. When we'd first taken the apartment, we'd flipped a coin on who'd get the bedroom and who'd sleep on the couch. Janet had lost.

I got into my pajamas then climbed into bed and wrapped my arms around the pillow. Maybe I'd have been smarter to stick with Blake. At least there wasn't any danger of falling in love with Blake.

Frank called the next morning around eleven and we made a date for the following Friday. He wanted to make it sooner, but I stalled and came up with excuses that I suppose sounded just as stupid to him as they did to me. I suppose the truth was that I was plain scared—scared it would turn out as it had with Blake or, if it *didn't*, scared I might find myself caring for a Brooklyn-bred police detective one hell of a lot more than I wanted to.

I got into work early the next morning. I'd read and heard so much about girls feeling that in some strange way they looked different after they'd swapped their virginity for a broader knowledge of life, but as I nodded hello to so many of the people I'd been seeing every day for so many years, I found myself totally lacking in self-consciousness. Maybe it was because the change had really been gradual; Blake had only been the period at the end of the sentence:

the words, 'there is no Prince Charming and you're not a kid anymore'—the words that had been forming—stringing themselves together over restless, long years.

Blake had dragged me off early for our Friday date—it had been about five-thirty and there'd been enough work to keep me until at least seven. One of the other girls had just come back from a two-week illness, but I was still trying to get caught up from handling both jobs.

I moved behind my desk and started piling all the loose papers into one tall heap. I had my own office—if it could really be called an 'office.' It was more of a fenced-off cubbyhole with a window. Officially, I worked for Sam Lewis, but actually I worked for John Kramer. All of us did. Mr. Lewis was head of the department but he was in his early sixties and just about due for retirement. He was a mild little man ho'd certainly been adequate—when he and the company had been young, but times had changed and he hadn't. I suppose the main reason they kept him on was because he'd been there close to thirty-five years and had the respect and friendship of an awful lot of people.

John Kramer was his assistant—officially. John Kramer was actually the one who ran the department. He was in his mid-forties, not much taller than I was and a little too heavy around the waist line, although none of it seemed to bother him. All of us liked him. On the surface, he was serious and tough but we'd all heard about the green high school graduate who'd been hired as a file clerk and promptly fired for mess-

ing everything up practically beyond repair. She'd gone into his office and cried—she'd come back out with another chance. She'd made good, too. Not that he was a sucker—he was just good about dealing with people. He'd made it clear that he believed a person's feeling towards the company they worked for would influence the quality of whatever they did, and therefore, it was more than worth it to show a little interest and patience with anyone really willing to try. He was also amazingly fair in handling any kind of dispute and darned good about getting raises for anyone he felt deserved it.

I knew he had two kids. At an office party one Christmas season, he'd broken down and showed snapshots, but he generally kept his business and personal life separate. I also knew that his wife had died about four years ago and it had been hard on him. That was about the time that he began to look his age.

Another thing about John Kramer was that there'd never been any gossip. Oh sure, he'd been seen in a restaurant about a year ago with a woman and a couple of the girls had started something about him getting married again, but he hadn't and that was the end of it.

I suppose his biggest headache—or at least his most constant one—was salesmen who promised delivery earlier than it was possible to get it out. The company manufactured a really cheap line of fairly-decent quality toys and sometimes, the promise of delivery ahead of what the competition could promise made all the difference. Blake's department took care of things

like publicity on free gifts to children's hospitals, or setting up our brand as a free gift in TV contests for children—that kind of thing.

My notebook was lying on top of the heap with two shorthand letters from Mr. Lewis. It was a very private policy between John Kramer and myself that he approve everything Mr. Lewis sent out. Then if something like, "I happened to notice this in with the other letters to go out and don't you think it might be better if——." I suppose Mr. Lewis realized what was going on, but he never said anything. I suppose it was a question of pride—or maybe 'dignity' would describe it more accurately. He'd helped build the company and it was obvious that he was not looking forward to the day when he'd have to let go.

I started typing: "We apologize for the delay——" while my thoughts turned to Frank.

I glanced at what I was typing, then yanked it out and threw it at the waste basket. I'd had my finger on the wrong letters and two lines of gibberish had stared back at me.

It was the first time that had happened in years.

I started over, then stopped and lit a cigarette. I hadn't emptied the ashtray since Friday and it had been so buried under papers I guess the cleaning women hadn't seen it. It was loaded and then I remembered how much more than usual I'd smoked on Friday, thinking about the date with Blake; knowing Janet wouldn't be home and debating over whether I'd ask him up.

I emptied it into the waste basket. Last Friday; it seemed like centuries ago.

Everyone else was in now and I could hear the

typewriters outside waking up. How strange it seemed to be sitting here as though nothing had changed—and knowing so *very* much *had* changed.

I thought of John and remembered the times he'd loaded me up with enough work for a week then told me to have it ready the next day, trying hard to keep his face straight. I remembered how seriously I'd taken him when I first came.

I wondered what he'd think if he knew about Blake. I caught myself on that one—fast. Middle-class morality; the phrase popped into my head and I wondered where I'd heard it before. I smiled. His reaction to Blake would probably be that he didn't give a damn one way or the other as long as I got my work done and didn't feel too lousy about it.

Which reminded me, I wasn't getting anything typed.

I wondered what Frank was doing at this minute.

I wondered what had happened with the three guys from the park.

Susan Carter poked her nose in. I'd seen her coming through the glass in the window facing the outside office.

"Hi—got anything you want filed?"

I pointed to the out box.

Susan Carter had—I guess you'd call it a Bronx accent. She was about twenty-one with too much make-up and a hair style that might have befitted a fashion model, but on Susan Carter, it looked cheap. I'd figured it out a long time ago that she'd come to work in the big city so she could meet a 'fella.' I'd seen her flirting with the salesmen at [redacted] opportunity, but so far, no engagement ring [redacted] ically

appeared on third finger, left hand. I suppose it was funny. I wondered whether she'd had the same chance I'd had to marry the boy next door, but had gone out looking for something better. Could we really have that much in common?

I smiled. Something better; an affair with Blake Gelezio and Frank Jelenzey at the ripe old age of twenty-seven. *Well good luck, I thought, I wish you the best of luck, Susan Carter.*

She stacked the papers neatly together, then smiled and walked out.

Around two that afternoon, the phone on my desk rang. I lifted the receiver and gave the cord about three twists so it would be untangled enough for me to get the receiver against my ear. "Ellen Michaels, shipping——"

"This is John Kramer. Can you come into my office?"

"Okay." I hung up.

I started out then wondered whether maybe he wanted to dictate something. I went back to my desk and grabbed the steno pad and a pencil.

His desk was as cluttered as mine. For me, it was unusual. For him, it wasn't. Starting in mid-September of every year, the Christmas rush was getting underway and the blotter on his desk became gradually burried.

His jacket was hanging over the back of his chair and his shirt was open at the neck, sleeves rolled up. I looked at him and suddenly found myself wondering whether he was attractive. I suppose that was another of the ways in which I'd changed over the weekend thanks to Mr. Gelezio. Men were no longer simply

people of the opposite sex, they were to be summed up and evaluated on masculinity and physical attractiveness.

His hair was deep brown, turning gray at the temples. His face was pleasant enough, but difficult to describe. I suppose the word that suited it best was *ordinary*. He had a straight nose and brown eyes that told you when he was kidding, if you knew how to look. His shoulders were broad and, even when he was sitting, he held them well. His posture was something I'd admired even before today. It was almost as though he were trying to compensate for the lack of height by standing as tall as he could.

His hands were sensitive. Funny—that was something I'd never noticed before today. Usually I was conscious of hands.

I was also conscious of liking him. There were times when I'd gotten a solid impression that it was mutual, but he'd never said anything. John Kramer was strictly business. I suddenly found myself wondering what he was like after five o'clock—or midnight, which was sometimes as late as he worked during the Christmas rush.

He was certainly masculine. Maybe part of it stemmed from the ease with which he took charge of things in any sort of emergency.

The phone on his desk had been ringing since I'd stepped into the office. He'd already taken care of two calls when he motioned for me to sit down and grabbed the receiver.

I smiled—a kind of sympathetic smile, showing him I knew what he had to go through—and sat down. I watched his face while he argued with whoever he

was talking to and wondered how he never got tired or sick of all the pressure. Even while he talked, two other lights were flashing on his phone—more customers clamoring for early deliveries.

"Okay, the twenty-fifth," he shouted into the phone, "but no earlier—" and hung up. For a moment, he looked at the blinking lights—like he was debating with himself—and then picked up the receiver and called the operator. "Look, will you hold any calls for me. I'll let you know when to put them through again."

He hung up, sat back and let out a deep breath. "Who wants you fired?"

"*What?*"

"One of our fine young vice-presidents called me into his office about an hour ago and subtly, like a sledge hammer, suggested I fire you."

My mouth was hanging open and I could feel the color rising in my cheeks. I felt like asking him *which* vice-president, but knew he wouldn't tell me. "What did you do?"

"Told him to mind his own business. He admitted he didn't even know you."

I smiled, just picturing the scene; the scene as Blake Gelezio had never imagined it. I kept wondering which vice-president. Mr. Kramer had used the word 'admitted.' I could just picture Mr. Kramer asking the questions that led to the admission that he didn't even know me. It must have been somebody fairly new. None of the ones who knew him very well would have tried a thing like that with Mr. Kramer.

"Look, if you think it's funny, okay—but not when it wastes my time."

I could feel the color rising in my cheeks.
"Just what do you mean by that?"

"Seems he told Stan Kellog that *he* ran that department and *he* made the decisions on who did or didn't work there. Even told him to mind his own business."

At least now I knew *which* vice-president.

I smiled. I wondered whether I actually hated him. "Oh, I see. I was supposed to come running up here—in tears, no doubt, begging you to get the job back for me, then you'd console me, tell me about the opening here and it would be all set."

He looked uncomfortable. "Something like that."

"But it didn't work."

"Nobody bats a thousand. Of course you *did* come up."

"Kramer told me to."

"Huh?"

"He told me to 'take care of it'—that the incident has 'wasted his time.'"

"Oh he sounds like a *real* smug bastard."

"Ever meet him?"

"Sure—we never talked much. How the hell did he know it was me? You told him?"

"He *doesn't* know it was you—and I frankly don't think he could be less interested. Besides, what made you think I'd be that upset over losing the job? A good secretary can walk into a fee-paid job with just about any large company in New York."

He grinned. "You'd lose your accumulated pension benefits."

For one split second, I thought I might start crying. Then I grabbed a stapler on his desk and threw it at him. He ducked and got out of his chair so fast it swung around, slamming against the desk.

He laughed, then grabbed me, hands on my shoulders, trying to force his mouth against mine. I struggled, but when our lips met, I stopped, hating myself almost as much as I hated him.

He loosened his grip. "I'm sorry," he offered

quietly. "Baby, I only did it because I'm nuts about you——"

I broke away, laughing and praying as hard as I could that it wouldn't turn into tears. "You lousy, lying bastard!"

"Ellie, baby——"

"Oh shut up, will you?"

"You said you'd call me."

"It's only been two days."

He reached for me again. "Seems like two years——"

I put my hands on my hips and looked at him. "Want to know what you are? Blake, you're *corny*. You're *corny as hell*!"

He dropped his arms. "Take it easy——"

"What an ego you've got! It's fantastic! Honest to God, it belongs in a laboratory somewhere. It should be scientifically researched and preserved for posterity!"

I could see his jaw muscles tighten. "Yeah?"

"What do you mean, *yeah*? It's not witty, it's not clever—really, 'honey,' I'd have expected much better from the fair-haired boy of the Public Relations Department."

"Why don't you get out of here?"

"Your irresistible charm, but I think now I can manage."

He stepped behind his desk and lifted the stapler from the floor where it had landed when I threw it at him. "You're a lousy shot, honey."

"Give it back. I'll try again." I wondered now how I would have felt if it had hit him. He'd have had a bad bump or maybe a headache or possibly a bloody

nose or lip. I suppose at the time I'd thrown it, I couldn't have cared less, but now I was just as glad I'd missed. I could just picture him grinning while he made up some obvious lie to explain how it happened and glowing with enjoyment in the knowledge that whoever he was talking to thought some woman he'd been sleeping with had thrown a tantrum. He'd manage it in such a way that no one who didn't know him too well would ever imagine the girl might have been fighting him off or infuriated by something stupid and insulting he might have said.

He opened a side drawer and dropped it inside. Perhaps the perfection of his unmarred physical appearance meant more to him than another laurel on his hard-earned reputation.

I started out.

"Almost as lousy as you are in other departments ——" he added evenly.

I swung around and faced him, immediately wishing I'd kept walking. A dozen answers ran through my mind, but the one that came out was, "As lousy as *I* am?" I smiled. His lips were a thin white line when I walked out.

Around four that afternoon, I was sitting in my office and a large bunch of flowers arrived. The card read, "Truce? Blake."

I threw all of it in the wastebasket. I wondered where he'd *gotten* the reputation. I knew he generally encouraged any gossip—indirectly, of course, mainly with grins and implications, but I couldn't help wondering what kind of woman would have responded to his stupid flowers. Maybe the answer was —someone who wanted to. Someone who wanted to

kid themselves that they mattered to him because, like me, they'd wanted to sleep with him and, at one point or another, found it difficult to admit to themselves that that was all.

I suppose what I'd said when I left his office had really gotten under his skin. He prided himself so much on being such a marvelous lover and now, perhaps he felt that he had to prove it. Great lover! I laughed, just thinking about it. On the other hand, I hadn't really given him much chance. So now he wanted to try again. I thought of Frank. It might have worked if I hadn't seen Frank in the meantime.

I noticed a leaf on the floor beside the wastebasket. I picked it up and tossed it in.

I looked at the pile of work on my desk. If Elaine hadn't been sick with me covering her job as well as mine for two weeks, I still would have had to stay late.

I sorted it into two piles; immediate and not so immediate. I could either start staying a couple of extra hours every night or I could come in for a full day on Saturday. I decided to cross out Saturday. The weather was still changing from summer hot to cold enough for a winter coat and if Saturday happened to be hot, I'd be stuck with their policy of no air-conditioning on weekends. I thought of Frank. I'd be seeing him Friday night—I wondered how I'd feel Saturday morning. I remembered how he'd wanted to make it sooner and was twice as glad I hadn't let him. I suppose it was funny. I sometimes wondered whether I was more afraid of sleeping with Frank than I'd been with Blake—probably because I'd been naive enough not to realize it might go wrong.

I opened my notebook and started typing. I felt as though I'd wasted a lot of time, which bothered me because I got paid for overtime—paid well. I thought of all the years during the *real* rush where I'd sent out for lunches and worked while I was eating without recording it as overtime, but I still felt some kind of neurotic obligation to work straight through without stopping for so much as a cup of coffee.

Or maybe it just mattered that I get it done and done well as a compensation for "failures in other departments."

At six thirty, I sent out for a sandwich. I almost ordered a milkshake, but remembered how I'd been planning to do some exercises and changed it to coffee. Most of the outer-office typewriters were quietly tucked under their covers, but the occasional banging of a file drawer reminded me that I wasn't the only person left.

Around seven-fifteen. I was just finishing up. At least I had some idea of where I was and what I was doing.

The phone on my desk rang.

I lifted the receiver. "Ellen Michaels, shipping——" I suppose it was mainly force of habit—at this hour, anyone dialing my extension probably knew who'd answer.

"This is Kramer. Will you take a letter?"

"Huh—oh, okay."

"Look, if you were just leaving, it can wait. It should go out tonight, but tomorrow morning would be okay."

"No, it's all right."

I picked up my notebook and started across

the bull pen. There'd been mornings when I'd come in and found work from him that was to be typed scribbled out in longhand. I knew it would save him time if he dictated it—and he *didn't* get paid for overtime. Of course, his yearly salary left little to be desired.

A cigarette was dangling from the corner of his mouth and the clutter on his desk seemed to have grown, but at least the phone wasn't ringing.

I sat down and opened the notebook.

"This goes to Herb Trojan at Acme—look it up. Dear Mr. Trojan——"

I finished the letter, wondering whether he was thinking of anything else. I wondered whether he'd given vice-president Stan Kellog a second thought since he'd spoken to me this afternoon.

I flipped the notebook shut and started out of his office.

"Hey——"

I turned around. "Yeah?"

He jerked his thumb towards the papers on the window-sill.

I could feel myself blushing. That was the kind of mistake I usually didn't make, and for some odd reason, it particularly bothered me that I'd made it in front of *him*.

"Something upsetting you, Miss Michaels?"

It was a good way of putting it. Someone else might have responded to the same instinct with 'What's wrong?', which would have been awkward to answer. The last time he'd asked me the same question had been close to a year ago and I'd blown up 'that I couldn't handle so much work. He'd gotten someone

from a temporary agency. Life had been a lot simpler in those days.

"I'll be all right," I answered awkwardly. "I—I'm sorry."

He nodded and went back to his work, indicating, I suppose, that the matter was finished.

I wondered whether he'd really looked concerned or whether I'd just imagined it. Could it really matter that much that somebody give a damn? Somebody I respected who wasn't trying to sleep with me or so naive they never would have understood even if I *had* wanted to talk about it. Or had he only cared because it was affecting my work?

I wondered again what he was like outside of the office. I started to open the door, then stopped and looked at him.

He glanced up. "Yes, Miss Michaels?"

I don't know whether I was crazy or what, but I suddenly opened my mouth and asked him a question that was absolutely none of my business but suddenly mattered a great deal. "How old are your children?"

He looked startled. "Girl's five, the boy's seven and a half."

"Thanks." It came out awkward and stupid.

I went back to my office and wondered what he was thinking. Maybe he thought I'd cracked up. Maybe he was right.

I'd just finished typing the letter when I saw through the glass that he was walking towards my office. He was wearing a raincoat, hanging open.

I held out the letter when he walked in. He skimmed it, then set it down in about the last clean space and signed.

"Good night."

I stood up. "Mr. Kramer, I—I didn't mean to intrude——"

"You weren't intruding. Why were you interested?"

"I don't know," I answered self-consciously. I looked out the window. "Is it raining?"

"Started about ten minutes ago."

It had been off and on all day. Like Friday. I remembered that Blake's raincoat was silk; Mr. Kramer's was less ostentatious.

I blurted it out. "I suppose I just suddenly started wondering what you were like—outside of the office, I mean. I suppose what started me wondering was the way you went to bat for me with Stan Kellog."

His eyes told me he'd picked up more than he was about to say. "Stan Kellog?"

I'd forgotten he hadn't told me. "You told me to take care of it. I picked up the name in the process."

"And did you—take care of it?"

"Yes."

"Good."

He walked out.

I grabbed my raincoat, then waited. I didn't want to meet him at the elevator. I'd already made enough of a fool of myself.

I waited about three minutes, then walked into the hall. The woman who supervised the clerical help was still at her desk—that was okay. She could lock up. There were five of us who had keys—I was one.

I started towards the elevator, then stopped. He was still waiting. I knew it had nothing to do with me—he'd had no idea how late I'd be staying.

I thought of turning back, but he might glance up and see me and then I'd *really* feel like an idiot. Of course I could always act as though I'd forgotten something, but maybe he wouldn't buy it. Or maybe I was blowing the whole thing out of proportion—in all probability, he wouldn't even give it a second thought.

I dropped the letter down the mail chute and continued towards the elevator.

The door opened before I got there, and I suddenly forgot I'd been worried about what he might think. "Hey, *wait*——"

The operator stuck his head out and grinned. "Well hurry up!"

It was pouring when we got to the street. I pulled a scarf out of my pocket and tied it over my head. I remembered debating this morning over whether or not to bring the umbrella, but I was always leaving umbrellas on the subway if the rain stopped and the papers had said it was going to clear up by afternoon.

Mr. Kramer started for the parking lot down the block, then looked at me and nodded his head for me to go with him.

I caught up—fast, turning up the collar on my coat. "Thanks."

"Where do you live?"

I gave him the address.

We got into the car and he pulled out. He flipped on the radio. Score one point; I'd learned that John Kramer liked having the radio on while he was driving.

I realized I was sitting in the middle of the seat and recalled all my little tricks for getting closer or farther

away, only with Mr. Kramer, I really didn't know where I wanted to be, so I stayed where I was.

I pulled out a cigarette. He reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a pack of matches then bent one back and lit it, all with one hand.

I took a deep drag. "That's a neat trick."

"Twenty years' practice."

"Then you've been smoking since you were——" I broke off, suddenly self-conscious. I'd just said the first thing that popped into my mind, and it had come out as though I were asking him how old he was.

"I'm forty three," he answered calmly.

"I didn't mean——" I looked at him and at least I knew he wasn't annoyed. It made me feel better.

A fly was buzzing busily around a pink smear on the glove compartment. I took a closer look.

"Probably ice cream."

The sound of his voice startled me. I laughed. "Five and seven and a half."

"She's decided she wants to be either a movie star or run a home for homeless cats."

It was the first time I'd ever know him to volunteer anything personal except for that time at the Christmas party when he'd pulled out their pictures.

"How long were you married?"

"Ten years."

I thought of Frank.

He pulled to a stop in front of the apartment building. He started to get out, but I put my hand on his arm, almost without thinking. "I'm capable of opening doors. It's raining——"

I drew my arm away, suddenly self-conscious about having touched him.

He smiled. Amazing! "Good night, Miss Michaels."

"Good night. Thanks for the lift."

He nodded.

I got out and hurried through the rain into the lobby.

I thought about him more than once that evening. Yes, I decided, he was attractive physically but much more than that, I liked him. It was obvious he was nuts about his kids. I wondered what they were like. I wondered what *my* children would have been like. I'd always assumed that someday in the nebulous future, I'd have children, but now I was beginning to wonder. I knew I *liked* children—I'd done a lot of baby-sitting while I was in my teens and I remembered how much fun it had been giving them baths and telling them stories. John Kramer had had a late start having his children. If I'd married the first man who'd asked me, I could have had a child by now about the same age as Mr. Kramer's little boy. I knew Frank wanted children—or at least there'd been a time when he had. He'd said he'd changed—I wondered how much. Then I decided I was being silly. Blake had started me wondering what it would be like to go to bed with just about every man I met, and now Mr. Kramer, after a lift home on a rainy evening, had started me wondering what their children would be like. Not that I'd have to be the mother of these children—I just wondered how they'd look and think with some particular man as their father. I wondered what Blake's nonexistent children would be like. I shuddered. Egotistical little monsters

—or else so battered down by their father's ego, they'd be afraid to look cross-eyed at a Juniper tree. I laughed. It was an expression I'd read maybe twenty years ago.

I got in early the next morning and was standing in the bull pen when Mr. Kramer came in. He nodded a brusque 'hello,' then went into his office. I wondered whether he'd given *me* a second thought. If he had, it certainly didn't show.

Friday came all too quickly, and along about two in the afternoon, I started getting butterflies in my stomach.

At three, I checked an impulse to call Frank and tell him I had a headache or something equally unbelievable. Besides, I didn't know where he'd be, I knew he was with one of the precincts in Brooklyn, but I had no idea which one. Or maybe he worked out of headquarters and merely stuck mainly with cases in the Brooklyn area. I was surprised to realize how little I knew about him. I wondered whether he liked football. I knew I'd always been bored with it. I *did* know he was interested in guns—and pharmacy, both of which left me cold.

I slowly realized that almost all of the conversations I'd ever had with him had been strictly small talk—or sex. Well at least we had *that* much in common—we were both interested in sex—with each other.

I left the office promptly at five. I got back to the apartment and tried to call him; no answer. He was supposed to pick me up at six-thirty and I got

an awful feeling as though he might be coming from wherever he worked without stopping off at his apartment first.

I debated about calling Charlie and finding out where I could reach him. At least I knew where I could probably reach Charlie—his apartment. He was probably shaving and changing his clothes before picking up Janet.

I smoked two cigarettes, then lifted the receiver and dialled Charlie's number.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I waited a long time before he answered.

"Charlie? This is Ellie."

"Hi—you got me out of the shower. Can I call you back?"

"No, I—I mean, there might not be time. I'm trying to reach Frank before he leaves, but he's not at his apartment."

"Gee, I don't know. He was going to call me. I thought you were him."

My hands were wet with perspiration. *I chickened out*, Frank. *I'm sorry*. "Would—would you tell him I called? We had a date, but I—I've been working late at the office all week and I'm tired." No, that wasn't good enough. "I've got an awful headache." That was worse.

"I'm sorry. I'll tell him to call you."

"No, I—I mean, that won't be necessary. Just give him the message. Would you tell him *I'll* call *him* when I'm feeling better?" That was another thing

I'd learned during the last few years; the really tactful brush-off. Saying I'd call told them not to, and then I simply didn't.

Charlie laughed and I couldn't tell for sure whether he was kidding. "Sounds like a brush-off."

I laughed too; happy little world. "When are you leaving?"

"About ten minutes."

"If you *don't* hear from him, will you let me know?"

"Sure. You *sure* you don't want him to call you?"

"Yes. I—I may be lying down." I felt like adding, *it's a really miserable headache*, but managed not to.

"Okay. Hope you feel better."

"Thanks." I hung up. What the heck? *It might* have been true. There'd be no reason why he *shouldn't* believe me—except that I'd made it pretty clear I didn't want him to call me.

I felt like getting drunk. I thought of Dave across the hall. He'd probably be willing to get drunk with me—or at least get *me* drunk.

I heard the door open and Janet came in. "Hi!"

I nodded.

"What's wrong?"

"I've got a headache."

She looked concerned. "Bad one?"

I felt like laughing. "Very bad." It was beginning to be true.

"What about Frank?"

"I couldn't reach him. I called Charlie—he's expecting to hear from him. He'll tell him."

"Can I get you some aspirin?"

"No thanks—I'll be all right."

"Aspirin would probably help."

"It's not that kind of headache," I answered awkwardly. I wished I could lie to her, but I'd never been able to. I could have said I'd already taken aspirin, but that would have made things too easy.

"I think I'll go lie down."

She looked awful concerned. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Get dressed."

She glanced at her watch. "Yeah—I better hurry. I'm meeting him in half an hour."

I went into the bedroom and lay down while she changed. I kept thinking how wonderful it must be to have such an uncomplicated life. Or maybe I'd made my own complications; I suppose that would have been a fairer way of looking at it.

About fifteen minutes after she'd left, the phone started ringing.

I closed my eyes and wondered how I'd feel if I heard his voice. He'd probably tell me to go to hell—unless he believed it about the headache. I somehow imagined he wasn't used to being 'brushed-off' and wondered how he'd take it.

I wondered whether he'd ever want to see me again; how I'd feel if it just ended—but that was what I'd wanted. Or was it? I remembered his arms around me. Maybe I could see him tomorrow—or next week. But not if he thought I was trying to make a fool out of him; not if he thought I was planning to stand him up then change my mind, then stand him up again.

It was suddenly the most important thing in the world to me that he believe I really had a headache—especially after I'd stalled him off until this late.

I grabbed the receiver, practically knocking the phone onto the floor. "Hello?"

It was Blake. "Ellie? Hi."

"Yes Blake?" I flopped onto the couch, suddenly feeling very tired.

"Look, I—I want to apologize. Honest, baby, I'm sorry."

"For what? Or maybe I should say, for *which*?"

His words were pleasant enough, but his voice sounded like he was holding his temper. "Can I buy you a drink? I could meet you—or I could pick you up in about half an hour."

"Only a drink?" It came out saccharin sweet, but I don't think he got it.

As a matter of fact, he actually sounded enthusiastic. "How about dinner?"

"Where?"

"You name it!"

"Four Seasons," I answered drily.

His timing was almost perfect—almost, but not quite. The split-second hesitation spoke volumes. "Okay—whatever you say."

I knew he meant it. He could certainly afford it. I suppose the hesitation had been on whether sleeping with me was worth that kind of investment. I might have been flattered except that I knew his overblown ego was all tied up in it somewhere: he was concerned with my opinion of him as a lover. *Lover*; the word sounded funny—as though it had something to do with what Blake and I had felt for each other. I laughed. "No, Blake, I don't want to go to the Four Seasons."

It sounded like he was smiling. His voice was soft. "At least you're not mad at me anymore."

I wondered what had ever given him *that* idea. "Look, I—I've got a headache." That headache was certainly getting a lot of use. I wondered why I didn't come right out and hang up on him. Maybe I was still attracted to him. I hadn't wanted it to be that way before and I didn't want it now, but there it was. Or maybe, in some crazy way, it *was* flattering to have Blake Gelezio chasing me.

"Headache?" He sounded skeptical.

"Bad one." I hung up.

I lit a cigarette, feeling pretty proud of myself. Self respect had triumphed over Blake Gelezio's physical charms—this time.

I kept half-expecting Frank to call. Charlie hadn't called me back, so Frank had gotten the message. I kept wondering whether he'd gotten it *too well*.

Around eight-thirty, I went out to the kitchen and scrambled some eggs.

I wanted to go to bed, but I knew I'd never be able to sleep. I remembered that Janet had mentioned she'd be back early—that Charlie had to study for an exam. I was glad. Maybe it would be easier if I had someone to talk to—or perhaps *listen* to would have been more descriptive.

By nine-thirty, I'd started thinking about calling him; calling, apologizing and assuring him it really *had* been a headache.

At ten-fifteen, I lifted the receiver.

I wondered whether he'd be home. I doubted it. It was Friday night. He'd probably gone through his

catalogue and called some other girl. It rang six times.

"Hello?"

"Frank? This is Ellie."

There was an awkward pause on the other end, followed by, "Can I call you back?"

"Okay."

I thought I heard a female voice somewhere in the background, but he hung up.

I stood up, walked to the window and lit a cigarette.

I closed my eyes and wished I could go to sleep and everything would be okay by the time I woke up.

He'd been with a girl. Maybe he was even in bed with her—or planning to be. His Friday night date; somebody to go to bed with over the weekend. If I were willing, I'd do just fine. Otherwise, he'd get somebody else.

I knew I wanted to see him—tonight. I remembered how proud I'd been when I hung up on Blake. That self-respect victory had suddenly turned into one step forward, two steps backwards.

It was ten minutes before the phone rang. I reached for the receiver, then checked myself. I let it ring four times, then picked up—slowly. "Yes?"

"Ellie? Frank."

"Hi."

"How are you feeling?"

The headache; I'd almost forgotten. I still didn't know whether he believed it. "I—I'm much better."

"Good. I'll pick you up." The words came out even; pleasant enough, but I began wondering what I'd be willing to give if I could only read his mind.

"You mean—*now*?"

"Well, not *right* now. I've got to get up there first."

"How long will it take?"

"Probably about half an hour."

My mouth felt dry. "Okay."

He hung up.

I sat back and lit a cigarette, took one drag, then snubbed it out. If I started smoking now, I'd probably go through half a pack before he got here.

I went into the bathroom and took a shower, feeling strangely uncomfortable about doing it; almost as though it were for Frank; as though I knew I'd be lying naked beside him in a little while and I wanted my body to be clean. But that wasn't true. I'd taken it because I knew I'd feel better afterwards—I usually did. I'd felt better after a shower since I'd been in high school.

Then I began asking myself who I thought I was kidding. High school was a long time ago; I was a big girl now.

I took a long look in the full-length mirror. I wondered whether what I saw was what he'd imagined. I somehow hoped so.

I got dressed. I remembered how stupid I'd felt taking off the girdle last Friday with Blake, so I wore a garter belt instead. I'd wanted to read Frank's thoughts. I wondered how they'd change if he could read mine at that moment. I wondered whether he'd laugh—yes, he probably would. Not nasty, but with almost patronizing amusement.

I combed my hair and put on make-up—carefully. I remembered how he'd kissed me after I'd washed

my face the last time he was here. I'd felt almost as though he were doing me a favor—no favors tonight, I decided. I splashed my face with cold water, then patted it dry. It looked natural now—soft and natural.

I added the mascara—dark brown. The face that stared back at me ten minutes later was attractive. I could say it with reasonable objectivity. It was the way I'd looked about five years ago with no base powder.

The downstairs buzzer sounded.

I panicked, then told myself to take it easy. I wasn't dressed yet, but that was okay. I could tell him Charlie was bringing Janet back early and that would stop him.

I pushed the button that released the door.

About three minutes later, I heard a key in the lock. I was startled and must have looked awfully stupid when Janet walked in.

She smiled. "Hi. I'm glad I didn't get you up. My key chain broke and I couldn't find the one for downstairs. It's probably in the bottom of my purse somewhere."

My hands were shaking. For some insane reason, my hands had started to shake when Janet walked in the door.

She looked suddenly curious. "Hey, you have makeup on!"

"Is it that obvious?"

"No—not at all. I mean, I noticed because I know you and I'm used to you without—you know, the eye stuff. Gee, you look beautiful. Did you go out?"

"No, I'm *going* out."

"*Now?*" She looked at her watch. "It's almost eleven."

"I know. He'll be here any minute."

"Who?"

"Frank." I walked into the bedroom. She followed. I tossed the robe onto the bed and opened the door to the closet.

"My gosh, it's so late. Where are you going?"

Probably his apartment, I thought. It's up to him. I'm sure he's quite smooth about managing that kind of thing.

I put on a slightly-flared gray skirt. "Probably we'll go for a drive." At least it wasn't a lie.

I took a deep blue bulky-knit sweater out of the drawer and slipped into it, being extra careful of the eyebrow pencil. I might not have another chance to put it on if I messed it up.

She sat on the bed and let out a deep breath. "Can you look beautiful!"

I smiled. "Thanks."

"I'm glad you feel better. I was worried, but Charlie said I shouldn't be. He said you'd probably be fine by the time I got back. How did he know?"

I felt suddenly uncomfortable all over again. He'd known because he could smell a brush-off and he'd probably told Frank.

"I mean, I know you called him, but——" She smiled. "I hope you have a nice time."

I checked a sudden impulse to laugh. 'A nice time'; I suppose that was one way of putting it.

The downstairs buzzer sounded.

She jumped off the bed. "I'll get it."

I ran a comb through my hair and checked my stocking seams. What an odd time to worry about stocking seams!

I heard the door open and Janet's familiar "Hi."

I took my time; like answering the phone when he'd called back—something I didn't want to do but it scored one small point in the self-respect department.

I walked into the living room.

He was wearing a white shirt, open at the neck, and a pair of gray slacks. I wanted him to touch me; hold me. I wanted to feel his hands against my body and I couldn't help comparing it to how things had been with Blake. At least Frank was kinder—he'd never treated me like some kind of stupid animal. I suppose I had no right to resent him—as he'd said, I'd started it. I hadn't really started it with Blake, but I'd encouraged him, so I guess it was just about the same—the same degree of responsibility. *Responsibility; maybe* that was what I hated most. It would have been so much less complicated—so much easier if I'd been a naïve, wronged little virgin, but I'd known what I was doing. I'd also known with Blake—I'd just been a little later in admitting it.

His face was serious. "Hi."

I nodded. I felt a stupid wave of self-consciousness I wanted to get rid of—knew I'd *have* to get rid of it if I were actually going to walk out that door with him.

Janet kept talking and I was glad—it meant I didn't have to. I suppose Charlie would have had enough sensitivity to be quiet, but then, Charlie's first loyalty was obviously to Frank and Frank apparently wanted

to leave. Janet even asked him if he'd like some coffee. I could just picture Charlie kicking her if he'd been there.

"You *sure* you don't want any coffee? It would just take a minute to fix——"

He smiled. "No, honey—I'm sure."

He slipped his arm over my shoulder.

We walked out and took the elevator to the lobby. Neither of us said anything, but I kept feeling it wasn't as awkward for him as it was for me. I wondered whether there was any way he could know what I was feeling—or be able to figure out why.

We got into his car and he moved his arms around me. Some instinct said I should at least *try* to stop him; that it wouldn't be any good to start anything neither of us had any intentions of finishing in a car surrounded by apartment buildings and Manhattan streets, but I couldn't manage to really care. I wanted him. I didn't want to wait any more than he did and knowing we'd have to didn't mean that much. I suppose it was like what he'd said about the kids at Coney Island; they weren't thinking that far ahead.

He kissed me, holding me so tightly I could hardly breathe, but I didn't care. The feel of his lips; the strength of his hands against my thighs; that was all that mattered.

The kiss ended and he went on holding me, his head against my shoulder, my hands running through his hair and both of us were trembling.

When he let go of me I knew he didn't want to.

He started the car then moved his arm over my shoulder and I cuddled as close as I could get.

It was a long minute before either of us spoke.

"Did you have any trouble getting rid of her?" I asked quietly.

"Who?" He moved his cheek against my hair.

"Whoever you were with when I called."

He didn't say anything and I could tell he was angry.

"Who was she?"

"Does it really matter?"

"Yes. For some crazy reason, it really matters."

He hesitated, then let out a deep breath. "She was a friend."

"I gathered that. Hope I didn't interrupt anything by calling."

"You did. Happy?"

If he'd been Blake, it would have come out with a smirk, but there was something about the way Frank said it that kept me from being angry—hurt, maybe, but not angry.

"If I were Janet, I might ask *what*."

"You're not Janet."

"That's no answer."

"Okay, she was a dame I met in a bar about six months ago and, occasionally—when neither of us have anything better to do, we have a few drinks and hop in the sack. I called her when Charlie told me you were sick."

"Did you believe him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

I smiled. "A 'dame'. You called *me* that."

"It's not the same."

"You *sure*?" I couldn't help wondering. 'Have a few drinks and hop in the sack'. What did he have in mind for *me*? Or maybe the difference was that he hadn't met me in a bar. It somehow seemed a rather *minute* difference.

"Yes I'm sure—"

"What's the difference?" I asked dryly.

He sounded tired. "Honey, if you don't know——"

"Don't tell me, let me guess. You *respect* me."

"Yeah, but that's not it. I respect her too."

"You——" I'd started to add *what*, but broke off in time. Middle class morality; there it was again. *Ellen Michaels, you're a prude. You've started sleeping around, but underneath, you're as conventional as the day you were graduated from high school.*

"Sure I respect her," he went on, almost as though I'd finished the question. "She likes sex and I'm as good as the next guy to give it to her. She's honest about it. That's all it means to her—that's all I mean. And that's about what she means to me. *Maybe that's the difference.*"

"Don't tell me you *love* me." I was sorry as soon as I'd gotten the words out.

"I didn't say that," he answered quietly.

"How old is she?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Forty, I guess. I don't know."

"Forty? But you're younger——"

He laughed. "So?" He tightened his arm around me. "You sound like a little kid."

"I'm not a kid," I answered quietly, "I'm twenty-seven."

"Yeah—you told me."

He pulled to a stop in front of an apartment building on a tree-lined street.

CHAPTER NINE

We walked into the lobby. A doorman in his late fifties was seated on a leather-covered bench, reading a magazine. He started to stand when he saw us, but Frank nodded for him to stay where he was.

We got onto the elevator and I conjured up a ridiculous picture of myself stepping off when it stopped and walking back down.

It was a nice building—not luxurious, but clean and I decided it had probably been built within the last twenty-five years.

I looked at Frank. "The graft in Brooklyn must be pretty good."

"Huh?"

"It's a nice building."

"Oh." He laughed. "The rents run a lot lower than in Manhattan."

We stepped off the elevator. It was the sixth floor. I walked beside him, not looking at him—listening to the quiet click of my heels on the linoleum-covered floor.

He pulled out his keys and I saw him watching me. We were standing outside of one of the corner apartments.

He opened the door.

I hesitated. "Frank——" My voice was low.

"What?"

"Don't—I mean, don't do what you did last time."

He looked like he didn't understand.

I swallowed hard. "I—I mean, don't grab me. You scared the hell out of me."

He looked as though he were trying to stay serious, but it didn't work. He laughed. "Okay."

He was still waiting. I walked inside. He closed the door behind us.

We were standing in the living room and I could see a small kitchen down the hall to the right. Beyond that was the bedroom. The door was open.

It was a nice apartment. For some odd reason, it seemed nicer than I'd expected. The rug was medium brown and the most noticeable item of furniture was a red leather chair in front of a mock fireplace. The couch faced the television set.

"This is nice. Did you plan it?"

"No."

"It was furnished?"

"No—furniture's mine."

I wondered whether some woman he'd been dating had designed it. I'd heard that some of them practically made a hobby out of that sort of thing. It seemed very much like an apartment where someone who didn't know would think a man lived. Perhaps he'd done some rearranging.

Small talk. Small thoughts. Keep talking. Only I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Ellie——"

"What?" It came out a little too fast, almost irritably. Why should I be *irritated*?

He put his hands on my shoulders and I turned my head away. "Have you got anything to drink?"

"You serious?"

"*Very* serious."

He dropped his arms. "Scotch okay?"

"Fine."

He walked into the kitchen. I sat on the couch and lit a cigarette.

"How do you want it?" he called.

"Plain."

He started back in with the bottle in one hand and a glass in the other.

I stubbed out the cigarette. I remembered how he'd done the same thing when he'd called back and said he'd pick me up. I was certainly wasting a lot of cigarettes over Frank Jelenzey.

He poured some into the glass. "How much do you want?"

I took it out of his hand and finished it in two gulps, then held the glass out again.

He hesitated. "What are you trying to do?"

"I don't know. Get drunk maybe."

He set the bottle on the table with a thud that hits.

I reached for it. "I don't want any more," I pronounced evenly.

"I'm beginning to wonder if you're serious."

I lifted the bottle and poured out another shot. At first, I thought he might try and stop me, but he didn't. I finished it as fast as I'd finished the first one. "Wonder *what?*"

"Whether maybe you haven't been quite as honest as I'd thought."

"What do you mean by that?" I was beginning to feel warm all over; from my toes to my fingertips.

"You *sure* there was some other guy?"

First I was startled. Then I laughed. "Yes, dear—I'm *quite* sure."

"Then why?" He looked from the bottle to me with an expression that said he didn't get it.

I felt suddenly light-headed. "Candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker." I laughed—or maybe *giggled* would be more descriptive. "I read that somewhere."

"Good for you. Do you want to just forget it? I can take you back——"

"Do you want to?"

"Hell no."

I laughed. I don't quite know why, but hearing him say 'hell no' in that tone of voice was suddenly the funniest thing in the world.

He moved onto the couch beside me and took me into his arms. I was still laughing. "Oh *no*—here we go again!"

His grip was like it had been when he brought me home last week. His eyes were closed and I could feel him trembling.

"Have you noticed how everything rhymes tonight? I think——"

He cut me off with his mouth and suddenly I didn't

feel the least bit silly. His hands were strong and I could feel sharp shivers up my spine whenever he moved them; wherever he touched me.

Then he was reaching under my skirt; no more preliminaries. We'd had enough of that.

His hand was under my slip and over my thighs—fast and rough. His fingers moved under the elastic and I shuddered. If it never came to any more than it was at that moment, it still would have been so much more than I'd ever had with Blake, I'd never have been able to compare them again.

He lifted me into his arms and started towards the bedroom and I kept remembering how I'd thought the kids at Coney Island were something out of a 'B' movie. I somehow felt as though I were back in that same movie—right before the fadeout. He was actually carrying me into the bedroom. I tried to remember whether there'd ever been a cheap romantic novel I'd read which lacked the scene where the hero carried the girl into the bedroom. On the other hand, how the hell else was I supposed to get there? I was hardly in any condition to walk. Physically, I wanted to get there, but the rest of me wanted to go home.

He laid me on the bed and opened my skirt. Blake had started from the top down, but this wasn't Blake; it was Frank. No more preliminaries. Or had I said that—or thought it? I couldn't remember.

He pulled the skirt off, then yanked up the slip. Yes, this much was the same. I felt as though I were keeping a score sheet.

Now it changed. He started undressing himself. Blake hadn't bothered with anymore than was abso-

lutely necessary. At least Frank hadn't asked me to help him—or blown up because I didn't begin on my own.

I closed my eyes. He wasn't as fast with the garter belt as he'd been with my bra in the car. Maybe he was used to women who wore girdles. If they were all in their forties, like the one he'd been with when I called, they probably *did* wear girdles. But they couldn't all be in their forties. Not with Frank. He could probably make his selection from about sixteen up. Sixteen; there's a law against that—and he could probably quote it.

He got the catch undone. I sat up and took off my stockings. He was looking at my legs and I liked it.

He still had his shirt on. It was all happening so fast.

He yanked at my pants and I was afraid they'd rip. "Don't——" I could feel my heart pounding in my breasts. I was so ready: my body ached for his touch—it was like the last time, and just as fast and frightening. I heard the ripping of nylon and then I could feel his body against mine with nothing to delay the completeness: the hideous closeness of thighs united too quickly. I struggled: I arched my back, twisting and turning: the solace of the liquor was gone.

His fingers moved quickly between us, sealing the contract. I had no right to fight him. I'd agreed—I'd encouraged him. As he'd said, I'd started it.

From there it was fast and I wanted it to be faster. I touched his buttocks, wanting him to hurry, encouraging him with my hands to get it over with so that I could move away—move away and be free from the weight of his body over mine; free from the pulsating discomfort of rising, burning frustration.

Then it was over—for him.

He stayed against me for a long time, his hands tightening and loosening on my shoulder.

When he finally moved away, I felt as though I'd start screaming. My body ached: everything inside me seemed bound with steel bands which refused to break. My nipples were taut and sore, shooting curious pains into my breasts. I turned my head so he couldn't see my face. The feeling of the liquor was gone, but his voice still seemed to be coming from somewhere else and, at first, the words hardly made sense.

"I'm sorry—Jeez, I'm sorry. Ellie——"

He touched my stomach and I didn't want him to. I still wanted—I didn't know what, but it hadn't been there—not for me.

His hand moved down to where it had mattered so much when he'd touched me in the living room.

I grabbed his wrist, but I might as well have saved the energy.

At first it was worse; the desire that came with the movement of his fingers, but then it was better—a *lot* better. So maybe it *was* just a dirty word I'd learned in high school, but Frank's hands made it different.

He knew when it was finished for me. I wondered whether it had been that obvious and felt strangely embarrassed; maybe because I hadn't wanted him to do me any favors. I remembered thinking it earlier when I'd thought of how he'd kissed me after I'd washed the make-up off.

He put his hand on my cheek and forced my head around until I was facing him. I closed my eyes.

"Don't——"

"What?"

"Don't make me look at you."

"Ellie——"

"No! I don't want to talk about it."

"I'm sorry. Jeez, I'm sorry."

"For what? I don't understand you."

"It was too long—thinking about you—wanting you."

I sat up and turned away from him. "It doesn't matter."

He put his hands on my shoulders, over the sweater, pulling me back down. I tried to move away, but he held me.

I let out a deep breath and stopped fighting. "Frank," I began quietly, "You're physically stronger than I am. I admit it, okay? You've proved your point. If you really want to hold me, if you want to force me, I haven't got much choice, have I?"

He let go of me. "Cut it out."

I sat up. "Got a cigarette?"

He indicated a small table beside the bed. "In the drawer."

I opened it. Cigarettes weren't the only thing inside. I smiled, dryly. "I see you're well prepared."

"Huh? Oh. Would you rather I wasn't?"

"*Weren't*. When you use it with 'would', it's indefinite. Would you rather I *weren't*!" It came out nasty.

He let out a low whistle. "Yes Ma'am. Anything else?"

I looked at him, then laughed. I wasn't angry anymore. "Not at the moment." I took one of the cigarettes and lit it. There was an ashtray on the table. I was tired. "I'd better get back soon. If it gets too much later, even *Janet* will be able to figure it out."

"Not yet," he answered quietly.

I felt suddenly lousy. "What do you mean?"

"Like you said, I'm physically stronger than you are."

I stubbed out the cigarette. It was starting all over again, wanting to touch him. "As I said, not 'like'."

"Like," he insisted. "You ever take time off from your grammar studies to watch a TV show? '—like a cigarette should.'"

"That happens to be wrong," I snapped. "Like needs an object—it means, 'resembling'. Something can't resemble 'a cigarette should.'"

He laughed. "Shut up, okay?"

I tried to stay angry, but it didn't work. "Okay."

He put his hands on my shoulders, rubbing his cheek against my hair.

"I don't suppose it would do any good if I asked you not to—" My voice was quiet.

"No. Take off the sweater."

"I could start screaming."

"You won't."

I swung around, facing him. "You seem pretty sure. I could also scratch you. You'd look pretty ridiculous with scratches all over your face."

He sounded tired. "Ellie—give it a chance."

"I *have*." My lips were trembling. "I've given it *two* chances."

"So what are you going to do? Swear off for the rest of your life?"

"That's a crude way of putting it."

"So maybe I'm crude. You still haven't answered the question."

"I don't *know*. Do I have to think about it—now?"

"Take off the sweater."

I hesitated, then yanked it over my head. "There! How about the rest of it? I'm sure you're not just collecting sweaters this season." I unhooked my bra. "Oh, I should have let *you* do that—you're so much faster than I am."

"Lay off, will you?"

"Off *what*?"

He grabbed the slip straps and I bit his hand.

"Ouch!" He jerked away.

I gave him my best sarcastic smile. "Do you mind terribly if *I* do it? I'd like to have *something* left to go home in."

He looked as though he were trying hard to keep his face straight. "Sorry about——"

"Like hell you are."

"No, I really am."

"I could have taken those off too if you'd let me—given me half a chance."

He was waiting, and I wondered uncomfortably at what point he'd become impatient.

I still had the slip on. I started to take it off, then faced him. "Don't look at me."

"Huh?"

"You heard me!" I snapped.

"Okay."

He sat up and faced in the other direction. He started taking off his shirt.

I pulled the slip over my head then took off the bra. I was naked now; naked and strangely uncomfortable about it. I folded my arms over my breasts, hugging my shoulders.

He started to turn around. I grabbed the sheet and pulled it over me.

He laughed. "No you don't!"

I hung on with my fists, laughing and not wanting to. "No—cut it out, Frank—*don't*——"

He forced my fingers and yanked it down. I made another grab for it, but he held my wrist. His face was suddenly serious.

I closed my eyes and stopped fighting. I was lying with my legs stretched out, my face turned away from him. I knew he was looking at me and a shiver ran up my back.

"You're beautiful." He whispered it, almost as though he were saying it more to himself than to me.

"Thanks. I'm also uncomfortable as hell."

"Why?"

"Lying here—like this. This, I *haven't* done before." I started to turn away from him, but it didn't work. He held his hand against my cheek. "*Look* at me, dammit."

I hesitated, then opened my eyes. "Okay?"

He smiled. "It'll do for a start." He propped himself up on one elbow, moving his free hand onto my breast.

I grabbed his wrist and tried to force him away.

"Take it easy," he said gently.

I could feel my neck muscles tighten—in anger. "Let me go—I don't *want* you."

"Okay—press charges."

"That's not funny." I tried to turn away, but his hand found my shoulder, gently forcing me onto my back. Damn him! All right, if *that* was what he

wanted, let him go ahead. It wouldn't work. There'd be nothing for me but frustration followed by a release I was quite capable of managing all by myself.

I gave it one last try to stop him. "It won't work," I said quietly.

"Give it a chance. You can't expect to have a man's reaction."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Hell, don't you know *anything*?"

"Certainly," I snapped. "I know the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution and how to touch type."

He kissed me—lightly. "Shut up. It takes time. It takes more time for a woman. Relax, will you?"

I moved my arms under my head and looked up at him. "All right—" It came out in scathing sarcasm, "in abject hopes that when Your Most Virile Majesty is finished *this* time, I may receive permission to get the hell out of here."

He grinned. "Shut up."

"Go to hell."

He laughed, his hand cupping my breast. No soap, brother, I'm sick of having my breasts pawed.

His lips touched the hollow of my throat, and a tingling sensation started in the pit of my stomach. Oh *no*, I thought helplessly.

He took my nipples between his fingers, gently massaging in a light, circular motion and I could feel them growing taut; feel the tension rising in my thighs. He lay his head on my breasts, kissing me; the warmth of his lips startling me with the pleasantness of the sensation. His tongue flicked across my nipple and I brought my arms down, intending at first to push him

away, but now I was only holding his head—*gently*, enjoying the smoothness of his forehead and *comparing* faint roughness of his cheeks and chin.

I ran my fingers through his hair, then down over his shoulders—*gently*, then *suddenly hard and disturbing*.

His hand moved down over my stomach, his fingers stopping—*searching*, then *starting again with subtle*, knowing perfection. I moved my legs, welcoming his touch. All right—let it build. Close my eyes and pretend there was a chance it might turn out differently.

I could feel my buttocks tighten, thighs arching forward as my back grew rigid, almost involuntarily—but he stopped.

I dug my nails into his back, still gripping his shoulders. "Don't stop——"

He moved his hands up over my thighs and waist, palms flat—taking his time. His lips touched my breasts again and my body started to writhe, legs twisting, my breath coming in short gasps. He kissed my throat—softly, then his lips were hard against mine, his tongue filling my mouth. He'd kissed me with his tongue before, but never like this and at first I almost drew back from the strangeness of it, but the strangeness subsided, fading into a new excitement; a new tremor flowing into my blood, mingling with and intensifying every other sensation aroused by his touches and it was in shame and anger and desire that I begged him, "Frank, *please*——"

He brought us together, gently, then rolled onto his side, then his back. His arms moved around me and it was better. I clutched at his shoulders, trembling—gasping, and felt his hands on my buttocks and thighs,

helping me; guiding the awkwardly-instinctive movements which were now as involuntary to me as the racing beat of my heart.

Then he was holding me—tightly, his hands hard against my flesh and I knew he couldn't wait any longer, but it was all right: I felt as though I were climbing a hill with everything I'd ever wanted waiting in the sunlight at the top, just beyond reach, but that I *would* be able to reach it; the pulsating rhythm of our bodies would carry me there—it wouldn't be much longer.

It wasn't.

I threw my head back, a sharp cry escaping from my lips seconds before his thighs and arms grew suddenly still and tired against me.

It was everything I'd ever dreamed or imagined it could be. It was all the fairy tales come true. It was every bit of desire I'd ever felt since I'd been old enough to be attracted to a man, all of it alive, lost—then found again in Frank's arms. . . .

He moved onto his side and held me close against him for a long time. I couldn't say anything. I kept my eyes closed and tried not to think; I wanted only to feel him against me and remember with my body how it had been only a few short seconds ago.

He kissed me—gently. I ran my fingers through his hair, staying as close as I could and wanting it to be closer.

I wondered whether I was in love with him. I couldn't stop; thoughts were coming, buzzing around in my brain like flies and just as annoying.

Where do we go from here, I kept thinking. I told myself it wasn't important, even though I knew it

was. I decided I was an awful coward. I'd been afraid with Blake, then afraid the same thing would happen with Frank and now I was afraid because it hadn't.

Sex had been new to me, but so was having an affair. What happens to affairs? I thought of Frank in his little house with trees in the back yard. No, not for me. Then I thought of him living there with someone else, and that was even *worse*. I knew I didn't want to *marry* him. If I had, I suppose it would have been much simpler. I'd have at least had a goal—some sense of direction. Even if it didn't work out—even if he never asked me, I'd at least have been able to go on hoping. I could have gone on with hope as long as both of us were single—as long as *he* was single. There couldn't be anyone else for me.

That was insane, I decided quickly. Of *course* there'd be someone else for me. I hadn't known. I'd been so dumb about it all. It might even have been good with *Blake* if I'd known then what I knew now. But not like this—Frank had something Blake didn't—*tenderness*.

I wondered where Frank had developed it. I remembered what Janet had said about him telling Charlie that when other kids were playing with toys, he was playing with switchblades.

I remembered him asking me last week in the kitchen whether my 'old man' had ever gotten drunk and 'knocked hell' out of me and 'the old lady'. Maybe *that* was the answer. Maybe his own life had been so empty of anything gentle, that he'd tried to make up for it with other people. No, that couldn't be it. I remembered the kids at Coney Island and how he'd *handled* it. I remembered the kind of work he'd chosen.

He propped himself up on one elbow, then kissed me. He smiled. "Okay?" His voice was soft.

"You know damn well it was."

"*Huh?*"

"You heard me."

He pulled himself into a sitting position, not touching me anymore. "Toss me a cigarette, huh?"

I handed him the pack.

"I don't get it," he said quietly.

I didn't answer.

"I said, what the hell is this?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do. Give me a match."

"I used the last one."

He stuck the cigarette back into the pack and tossed it at the table. It was a good shot.

I looked at him, then suddenly threw my arms around him, holding him tightly, not looking at him.

"Frank, I'm sorry. I—I'm all mixed up——"

He touched my hair, holding my head against his chest. I ran my fingers over the muscles of his shoulder, down his arm. His body was firm and strong. I laid my hand flat against his chest; it was good to touch him.

His arms moved around me: our lips met, but more in tenderness than desire.

He tightened his hands on my shoulders. "Ellie, I——"

He broke off and I was glad. I didn't want him to say it. Say *what*? Maybe it was all in my mind that he'd started to say 'I love you'. Maybe the real reason I was glad he hadn't finished the sentence was that now I could finish it however I wanted. It would certainly be

more noble to tell myself I hadn't wanted him to say it because I hadn't wanted to see him hurt. I suppose that *was* part of it—if he'd started to say what I'd imagined; what I *wanted* to imagine.

I thought about going back to the apartment. I wondered what it would be like when I finally had to leave his side; draw away from his touch, get dressed and leave. He'd take me back. At least there'd be the car ride, but then what? An awkward 'good night' outside the apartment. Then I suddenly realized it wouldn't be good *night*, it would be good *morning*!

CHAPTER TEN

I sat up and grabbed his wrist, looking at his watch.

"What's wrong?" he asked, startled.

"My God, it's almost four-thirty!"

He seemed surprised. "*That* late?"

"Or early," I answered quietly. "I can't *do* it. I can't drive up with you and walk into the building at five or a.m."

He grinned. "Gee, that's really rough."

"It's not funny!" I snapped.

"Okay, it's not funny. So stay here. I'll take you back at some respectable hour tomorrow—I mean, today."

"Oh, that's just great. Janet may be naive, but she's not *stupid*."

He looked at me curiously. "It would bother you that much if she knew?"

"Yes it would bother me *that much*."

He shook his head. "What do you want me to do?"

"You'd *like* her to know, wouldn't you. Janet and Charlie and anybody else who'd listen!"

"Now wait a minute——"

"What for?" I threw my arms around the pillow.

"My God, I'm so ashamed."

"Ashamed? Honey, look—I—I mean——"

"Sure, it's fine for you. Adds laurels to your reputation." I was sorry as soon as I'd said it—this was *Frank*, not Blake.

"Is that what you think?" he asked quietly.

I sat up, trying hard to hold back the stupid tears that seemed so close to showing. "No, I guess not. Will you tell Charlie?"

"Probably not."

"What do you mean, 'probably'?"

"If it's really going to bug you, okay—I won't tell Charlie. I'll swear a solemn oath of secrecy. I won't tell *anybody*. I'll even lie if they ask me. Okay?"

"You seem to think it's awfully funny."

"Not me," he answered seriously.

"And what do you mean, 'if anybody asks.' If they ask *what*? What you did over the weekend? How you *made out*?"

He let out a deep breath. "Those are your words, not mine."

"What do you mean, 'if anybody asks?' Who would ask?"

"Okay. Charlie might."

"That's disgusting."

"What the hell is disgusting about it? If Janet said to him, 'Ellie went out with Frank on Friday night and didn't get back till Saturday. Why, Charlie, why?'—then, he might ask me. Okay?"

"I'd think it would be pretty obvious," I answered uncomfortably.

"He might make a casual mention of it—if he even did *that* much."

I smiled.

"What's funny?"

"Your imitation of Janet."

He laughed. "She's a nice kid."

"What do you mean, 'nice'?" I asked evenly.

"Well *you* know, she's——" He broke off and looked at me. "Oh Jeez, forget I said anything." He rolled onto his stomach, laying his head over crossed arms.

"Define 'nice'," I insisted.

"No."

"Why not? Because you're talking to *me*?"

"Okay." He sounded as though he were losing his temper. "A nice girl is a virgin. A nice girl would not even have come up to my apartment, much less gone to bed with me. There. You happy?"

I could feel myself starting to cry and not wanting to. The whole thing was ridiculous.

He sat up and put his hands on my shoulders. "Honey, don't—I'm sorry."

"It's what you think, isn't it?"

"No."

"Then why did you say it?"

The pitch of his voice was rising. "You m—mad! What do you want me to say? You find something wrong with me, from my grammar to——broke off. "I'm half afraid to open my m—added quietly. "And now I'm supposed to——because I said Janet was a nice kid. I mean——nice. You're the one who knows all the v—define 'nice'."

"I think I have."

"That's *your* definition, not mine."

"What's yours?"

"I don't suppose it would do any good if I suggested we drop it——"

"No, it wouldn't."

"Ellie——" He sounded suddenly tired. "Ellie, I like you. *You're* a nice kid. Okay?"

"I'm not a kid," I snapped.

"Okay, you're a nice old lady. I believe in courtesy to senior citizens. Tell me what you want me to say, I'll say it."

"Shut up."

He looked as though he were having trouble keeping his face straight.

I laughed. "Okay—you win. I'll drop it." I lifted his wrist and looked at his watch again, squinting in the semidarkness around us.

He jerked his arm away. "Forget it."

"Janet's going to be worried sick."

"What makes you think she's awake?"

"She knew I was with you. I wonder why she hasn't called. Oh God, know what happened? She called Charlie and Charlie told her to mind her own business."

"That really bugs you——" He sounded curious.

"I suppose it shouldn't," I answered quietly. "I guess it would be hard to keep it a complete secret. I never really thought much about that before——"

"What?"

I lay down and stretched out. "What it ~~was~~ ~~was~~ to have people who knew me know I was ~~in~~ ~~in~~ fair. Of course, at *that* time, I never ~~had~~ ~~had~~ have an affair. That *is* what you

He rolled onto his side and started touching me; my breasts, my stomach, my thighs. I folded my arms under my head and made it easy for him, acutely conscious of my nipples contracting under his touch.

I started to object, but he cut me off with his mouth. His lips were warm and the now-familiar sensation of his tongue against mine was thrilling: anticipation replaced fear.

He lifted my wrist, gently—guiding my hand down over his stomach. I tensed. I suppose I *did* want to touch him, but it was something I'd never done before; another aspect of the previously forbidden, and I still wasn't quite used to giving myself permission—permission to love and be loved, with every kind of physical caress given and taken.

Lovel No, I didn't want to think of it in those terms. I didn't want to think at all, only feel—feel the closeness of his body, his lips, his hands.

His hand on my wrist remained steady, but without force. He waited until some of the tension in my arm disappeared and I moved with him, willingly—searching, caressing, stroking, my own pleasure intensifying in the knowledge that I was giving *him* pleasure, but it was more than that: it was exciting to me—almost as exciting as the soft touch of his mouth to my breasts.

I threw my arms around him, clutching—clinging. He moved onto his back, carrying me with him. He brought us together, and the beginning was slow for both of us; slow and sensual, reveling in the warm familiarity of bodies known to each other yet still new.

My thighs arched, my body carrying me beyond the

realm of sweet desire into pleasures more intense than any and every experience I'd ever known.

It ended—violently.

Then peace—gentle, wonderful peace.

I stayed in his arms, feeling small and warm and sleepy. I closed my eyes.

When I woke up, it was morning—or maybe late afternoon. The sun spilled over the bed and Frank was snoring. It struck me funny. He also needed a shave. I wanted to touch him, but was afraid of waking him. The physical attraction was still there, but it was rapidly taking second place to something new; a desire to simply hold him in my arms and know that he was all right—that he wasn't sick or tired or worried.

I looked around. It was the first time I'd really seen the room. It was a nice room—comfortably furnished and arranged to a man's taste.

I looked down at my body, then slid back under the sheet. Our clothes were lying all over the place, the bed and the floor.

I rolled onto my stomach and made a grab for my bra. It was farther away than anything else and I'd been wondering whether I'd be able to get dressed without getting out of bed.

I realized it wouldn't work and started to put my feet on the floor.

His hands touched my waist and I jumped. "Hey——"

"What?"

"You scared the hell out of me."

"Yeah?" It sounded as though he were grinning.

He pulled me back down beside him and it was everything all over again. . . .

When it was finished, I kissed him—gently. I smiled. "Don't you ever get bored?"

"With *you*? Never!"

I laughed. "You're pretty glib for—hey, what time is it?"

He glanced at his watch. "One thirty."

I swallowed—hard. "There goes any chance of me coming in while she was still asleep."

"That really bugs you——"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Not as much as it did."

"Ellie——"

"What?"

"Let's stay here all weekend." He tightened his arms. "Right like *this*——"

"I want to get back," I answered seriously.

"Why?"

"I don't know—to get it over with, I suppose."

"You mean seeing Janet?"

"I mean seeing *you*, stupid. Now get dressed."

"Me?"

"Please excuse me," I began evenly, "I'm rather new at this sort of thing, but let me see if I understand. Am I supposed to spend all weekend every weekend in bed with you?"

He sat up. "H-e-r-e we go again!"

"What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?"

"Skip it. Get dressed, okay?"

I looked away from him and closed my eyes. I wondered whether I were crazy—why did I always end up picking a fight with him? I tried to remember even *one* that I hadn't started. There weren't any. I started to say I was sorry, but decided that would only make things more of a mess.

He had his robe on and was starting out for the bathroom.

I got dressed. I decided I could take a shower when I got back home. The pants were in pretty bad shape, but they'd do for another hour or so.

When he came back in, he'd shaved. I don't know why, but I had the strongest desire to watch him shave and I was sorry I hadn't thought of it sooner.

"I can—cook some eggs, or something," I offered awkwardly.

He jerked his thumb towards the kitchen.

We ate and drove back to the apartment building without saying much. I didn't even let him get out of the car. 'Let him'——I suppose that was a funny way to think of it. He could have done whatever he wanted. I'd asked him not to get out of the car.

I got out my keys while I was still on the elevator, selecting the one that fit the apartment door and holding it so the others wouldn't make any noise.

I slipped it into the lock, wondering why the hell I felt so uncomfortable. If I wanted to spend the night with Frank—or anyone else, as far as that went, it was my business, not Janet's.

I'd just about made up my mind to be furious at her when I decided the whole thing was stupid. It wasn't Janet I was angry at, it was myself.

Okay, I thought, so I spent the night with him. So what? I opened the door.

Janet was sitting on the sofa wearing a pair of black toreador pants and a plaid shirt. She had no make-up on and looked about eighteen.

"Hi," she offered awkwardly.

For some reason, it struck me funny. I thought may-

be I should make a note of it; what to say when someone you've always assumed had the same moral standards as you suddenly shows they don't. You say *hi*, in precisely that tone of voice.

I smiled. "Hi."

"I—I called Charlie when you didn't get back. I was worried. I woke up around three and you weren't back yet."

I sat on a chair facing her and stretched out my legs. "You called him at three a.m.? He must have *loved* that."

"He said that since you were with Frank, I shouldn't worry. I mean, he said Frank could take care of himself or—or anybody he was with. I mean, if there was any kind of trouble."

If there *were* any kind of trouble, I thought. Maybe I'd been unfair to him. Maybe *all* people from Brooklyn made that mistake.

"Janet——"

She looked hurt and concerned. "Ellie, why'd you *do* it? Frank has so many girls. I remember Charlie kidding me about it—he said if he had whatever Frank had that got him so many girls, he'd never waste himself marrying just one—that it would be unfair to the whole female sex."

"Who said anything about *marriage*?" It came out short-tempered and I was sorry.

She looked startled. "But if you *don't* want to marry him?"

I laughed. "Oh honey, take a good look at him next time you see him."

"What do you mean by that? What's wrong with him?"

"*Nothing*. That's the point. He's about the most physically attractive man I've ever met."

"Ellie, I think he's attractive too, but I don't *love* him. I only love Charlie. I mean, you can't just go around——"

"What?" I snapped. "And why not? Because *you* say so?" I stood up. "I want to take a shower."

I started for the bathroom. She jumped to her feet and caught up with me. "Ellie—please don't be mad—at me, I mean. I—I'm sorry if I said anything——"

I turned around and looked at her. My voice was suddenly soft. "I'm not mad at you, Janet." The word should be *angry*, I thought. *Mad* means *insane*. You're cracking up, Miss Michaels. "I—I appreciate it that you care. But don't worry about it—I know what I'm doing." *Sure* I do!

Janet didn't look too positive. "Okay. I'll mind my own business."

I smiled.

She looked happier. "Anyway, I'm glad you're not mad at me."

I laughed.

I went into the bathroom and took a shower.

I half-expected him to call that night, but he didn't. When Sunday went by and still no ringing telephone—except for Charlie, I began feeling more than a little uncomfortable. Had I really made him that angry? I started giving myself stupid reasons. Maybe something had come up with his work and he hadn't had time. Detectives worked irregular hours when they were all wrapped up in cases. I knew that from books and movies and TV shows.

But how long does it take to pick up a phone and dial a number?

Maybe he was sick. I got rid of that one—fast. If I hadn't, I might have wound up convincing myself he was practically dying and I should call *him* immediately. But on the other hand, maybe it was possible. Maybe somebody he'd arrested had showed up and shot him.

I moved onto the couch and lit another cigarette. No, he wasn't incommunicado in some hospital, he was right there in his apartment—or maybe somebody else's—some girl's apartment.

I closed my eyes. What went wrong?

I remembered him telling me I found everything wrong with him. I remembered how annoyed he'd been with some of the fights I'd picked. Maybe, underneath, he was *really* angry.

Or maybe it was some kind of vicious little game. Maybe I was supposed to sit and stew and finally call him. Maybe I was supposed to go crawling back, begging him to please make love to me again.

I stubbed out the cigarette. Not *me*, brother.

I looked at the phone. How easy it would be to lift the receiver. I could be quite casual about it—tell him I'd forgotten something—or lost something and would he please see if he could find it. *Lost something*. Ugh! I was sure he could have a fine time making a joke out of *that* one.

But I wasn't being fair. He *didn't* make jokes like that. I'd been the one who kept goading him. I wondered why. Maybe it was for reassurance—maybe I felt that if he didn't turn it into something out of the

them out. I knew I'd never list it as overtime—it was *my* fault. The light was still burning in Mr. Kramer's office when I finally left.

Janet was watching television.

I walked in and looked at her, awkwardly. I was damned if I'd ask her. If he *had* called, she would have told me. I'd have given almost anything if I could have kept her from knowing how much it mattered, but I think *anyone* would have been able to see. I suppose the main reason she mattered so much was that I was afraid she'd mention it to Charlie and it might get back to Frank. Not that I had any visions of him running to the phone and calling him, but it might slip—if either of them happened to mention me.

If *Frank* ever mentioned me; I wondered whether he did. I wondered whether he'd thought of me. He *must* have. Maybe he didn't want to see me again—or at least not right away, but I knew I was still in his thoughts. He couldn't have forgotten; he couldn't have blotted it out.

I smiled. Keep it casual. Pretend she doesn't know. "Did you leave any of the hamburger?"

She nodded. "You didn't eat yet?"

"I wasn't hungry." No, I shouldn't have said that. Why wouldn't I have been hungry—unless my stomach was tied in knots.

I walked into the kitchen. I didn't even know she was in the doorway until I heard her voice.

"He didn't call."

I started to say, 'who?' but I knew I wouldn't be kidding her anymore than I was kidding myself.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Ellie—I could call Charlie and ask him."

"Ask him *what?*" I took the hamburger out of the refrigerator. I still wasn't hungry, but I knew if I didn't eat, I'd feel even worse.

"Why Frank didn't call," she answered simply.

"No!" I made a conscious effort to lower my voice. "I mean, I—Janet, I'd feel like such a fool if you did that. The only way Charlie could find out would be to ask him, and he'd think I wanted to know—he'd know I cared."

"Well don't you?"

I laughed. "Honey, it's not that simple."

"Why not? If Charlie didn't call *me*, I'd call him."

"Did you ever go to bed with Charlie?" I asked dryly.

Her face colored. "Of course not!" She looked suddenly self-conscious. "I—I mean——"

"I know what you mean," I answered quietly. "Anyway, that's what makes the difference. That and the fact that you're engaged to Charlie——"

She shook her head. "I used to call boys up before I was engaged. I even called Charlie after the first time I went out with him." She laughed. "Mother said it was terrible."

"Janet—promise me—*please* promise me you won't mention this to Charlie."

"Okay." She hesitated. "What about a long time in the future? Can I tell him then?"

"No!"

"Doesn't seem quite honest."

I put the skillet on the burner then stopped and looked at her. "Why do you feel you have to tell him *everything?*"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I just do. But I won't on this—if it really matters."

"It really matters."

"Okay." She hesitated. "What if I tell him in ten years?"

I laughed. "Okay, tell him in ten years."

The telephone rang. . . .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Janet broke into a grin. "I hope it's him!"

If only she wouldn't be so cheerful about it. She was half-way into the living room before I could stop her.

"Janet——"

She swung around. "Huh?"

"Let it ring—I mean, don't be in such a rush."

"Oh." She shrugged her shoulders. "Anyway, it's probably for you."

I lifted the receiver on the fourth ring. "Hello?" I wondered whether I should have let Janet answer. I knew I was being ridiculous; I'd have been lying if I'd stood there and waited then got on the line sounding casual and surprised.

Only I might as well have saved the energy.

It wasn't Frank, it was Blake.

I sat on the couch and stretched out my legs. "Oh, hello, Blake——" My eyes met Janet's. She looked almost as let down as I felt.

She walked back into the kitchen. Not that she had anything particular out there, it was merely an un-

spoken agreement that I'd leave when Charlie called and she'd do the same for me.

"You sound disappointed," he offered with a cheerfulness I didn't believe.

"How *should* I sound?"

"Grateful. *Don't hang up*——" It came out fast. "I was only kidding."

I laughed. "Okay. What's on your mind?"

"You—as usual."

"Thank you, dear. I'm suitably flattered."

"Enough to have a drink with me?"

I laughed. "It's after eight. Why did you call so late? Afraid I'd want to go to the Four Seasons if you called me before dinner?"

"Honey, I *wanted* to make it for dinner, but I got tied up at the office."

I smiled. "That's one thing that keeps you fascinating, Blake——"

He sounded as though he really believed it. "What?"

"I never know when you're lying."

"*Baby*——"

"Drop it, okay?"

"Can I pick you up?"

I thought it over. I might not be here if Frank called, but maybe it would be just as well. Let him *really* think I didn't care. No—then he might not call again. On the other hand, if *he* called *me*, it wouldn't look at all as though I were chasing him—or crawling, if I called him back. It would only be courteous. I smiled. I wondered whether the general rules on courtesy applied between a man and woman who'd slept together—it seemed somehow that they should change. I wasn't

quite sure *how*, but something should be different when they talked to each other.

Then I thought of how I was talking to Blake. *That* had certainly changed. There'd been a time when I'd wanted him to like me, but now that I'd gone to bed with him, I didn't particularly care. It struck me funny. From everything mother had ever said on those rare occasions when she mentioned the subject, it was supposed to work the other way.

"Hey, Ellie—how about it? Give a guy a break."

A break. "Blake, you're not only corny, you're trite. Pick me up in half an hour."

"Okay."

I hung up.

What the hell? Frank wasn't the only man in New York City.

But Frank was the only one I wanted.

I went into the bedroom and changed my clothes. The dress I put on was black, but tailored enough that it would do for the office or an evening cocktail party, depending on the accessories. I took a long, blue necklace and wrapped it around my throat three times. It hung comfortably now; it was chic; it was the way I wanted to look. I wanted him to think I was beautiful. I wanted him to be standing there panting when I finally closed the door in his face.

I decided that thoughts like that weren't very *nice*—but, on the other hand, neither was Blake.

I walked into the living room and Janet looked startled. "You going out with him?"

I don't know why she asked. The answer was obvious. Then I told myself to stop taking it out on Janet.

It was not Janet I was angry at. "Yes. He asked me to have a drink with him."

"He's the blond guy, right?"

I smiled. "Right."

"What if Frank? . . ."

"Tell him I'm out."

"Okay." She smiled. "It'll serve him right."

If anyone else had said it, I might have been embarrassed. With Janet, I was at least glad to know *somebody* was on my side. I smiled. "That is *not* why I'm going out with Blake. I—I just don't feel like sitting around the apartment all evening."

"Oh, sure. I didn't mean——"

"And *stop* feeling sorry for me!"

She looked startled. Then she smiled. "Okay."

It was approximately eight-thirty when the downstairs buzzer sounded. Times *had* changed. The other four times we'd gone out, he'd been between fifteen and twenty minutes late.

Janet started to push the button to release the downstairs door, then suddenly stopped and looked at me. "I'll count to ten, okay?"

I laughed. "Never mind."

She grinned and pushed it.

He was wearing a dark brown suit, expensive and impeccably neat. He smiled, and I felt like counting his teeth; white, straight perfect teeth. "Hi."

I nodded.

We left.

His car was the latest model Cadillac. He held the door for me while I climbed in, then he walked around to the other side and got behind the wheel. I was really

getting the royal treatment. Prior to tonight, he'd generally opened one door and told me to "scoot over".

He started driving.

I pulled out a cigarette. Force of habit, I guess. Get into a car beside a man and pull out a cigarette. Then, in case there were any awkward pauses at the beginning of whatever the conversation turned out to be, it was up to him to fill them. I'd appear perfectly poised and relaxed, absorbed in the natural, time-consuming nonsense of caring for a cigarette.

"Anyplace special you want to go?"

I shook my head, half expecting him to suggest his apartment. I'd never seen it, but somehow I imagined it must be some kind of cozy little palace.

"I know a place——"

I smiled, dryly. "Your apartment?"

He sounded hurt. "Honey, this is for an apology for the way I talked to you. Give me a chance to prove it."

"Prove *what*? That you're sorry? I believe it."

He looked as though he were surprised and trying not to show it.

I laughed. "After all, you wanted to be in bed with me again *long* before tonight."

"You didn't give me much chance with *that* either," he answered quietly.

I took a long drag on the cigarette, laying my head against the back of the seat and blowing the smoke through my nose. "This car doesn't quite suit you, Blake."

"Huh? What's wrong with it?"

"Wrong? Nothing. You just seem more the type for a convertible." The fact that it was a Cadillac was

certainly right—a rather trite status symbol. *Status symbol*; it sounded like a phrase out of the same book or whatever it was that had given me the phrase *middle-class morality*.

He shook his head. "Convertible's too flashy."

It was a good point. I suppose his work did require at least *some* semblance of dignity in the car he drove. I suddenly began wondering what his salary was. I knew it was good, but I also knew there was money in his family. From the occasional, vague references he'd made to his father, it was obvious that they weren't very fond of each other—to put it mildly. Maybe that was why it mattered so much to Blake that Blake be called *Mr. Gelezio*, and someday be a vice-president.

He glanced at me. "What are you thinking?"

"Huh? Oh. I was wondering how much money you've got."

"What?"

I laughed. "If you could see your face——"

"You were kidding."

I shook my head. "Is that so terrible?"

He hesitated, then laughed. "No, I guess not. What did you decide?"

I stretched. "That you're well-heeled. A well-heeled heel." I laughed. "Good Lord, that bad and I haven't even had anything to drink yet."

I looked at him and it was obvious that *Mr. Gelezio* didn't *like* to be called a heel.

"Why—or maybe I should say 'since when' do you care how much money I've got?"

"I didn't say I cared—I only said I wondered—"

or that I *was* wondering at the time you asked what I was thinking."

He pulled into a parking lot, handed his keys to the attendant, and got out. He walked around and opened the door for me. I took his hand and climbed onto the street.

We crossed over to a hotel and walked into the cocktail lounge. The piano player was good.

We sat at one of the booths back from the bar. I felt like ordering ginger ale as I had on all our other dates when I'd wanted to be sure nothing I didn't approve of might happen between us.

He smiled. "What will it be?"

I wondered whether he'd forgotten. It was certainly possible; Blake Gelezio hadn't paid half as much attention to me in those earlier days.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Rye and ginger." What the hell? Maybe I'd get drunk—it was Blake who was picking up the check, not me. I could get drunk over Frank on Blake's money. Or *was* it Blake's? Would he actually have the gall to put it on the expense account? The idea struck me as very funny and I checked a sudden impulse to ask him. No, not even Blake would do that. It wasn't the money, it was the principle.

I pulled out a cigarette. He leaned over, lighter all ready before I even had it in my mouth.

I took a long drag. "Thanks. Tell me what happened."

"What?"

"You. Blake, you're actually behaving like a gentleman. Remember me? Ellie Michaels—secretary, etc.

ping department. There's not a damn thing I can do for you."

"I wouldn't say *that* exactly," he answered quietly.

"Here it comes. What?"

"You know *what*."

I slapped my hands down on the table between us. "*That's* better. That's the good old Blake I remember!"

"And cut the sarcasm!" He sounded furious.

"Lower your voice. People are looking." I felt suddenly stupid. I wasn't supposed to worry about that kind of thing anymore; I was supposed to be 'sophisticated'.

Blake's reaction was exactly what I would have expected. He glanced around quickly, then lowered his voice. I wondered what Frank would have done.

"What the hell do you want from me?" he went on.

"What makes you think I want anything?"

The waitress brought our drinks and I suppose I should have been flattered. She was pretty, but Blake didn't even bother to look at her legs as she walked away.

"Then why did you come?"

"Blake, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, come on, honey—the angle. You know what I want. Why are you here if you don't want the same thing? What *do* you want?"

I picked up my purse and gloves. "Thanks for the drink."

He grabbed my wrist.

"People are looking, *darling*——"

He let go. "I'm sorry. Really. I don't understand you. What the hell makes you tick?"

He sat down again. "So finish your drink."

I checked a sudden impulse to toss it in his face. It would have been so easy—almost like an involuntary reflex. I could just picture his expression as it changed from shocked surprise to outraged indignation. The drink would drip off his face onto his shirt and suit jacket—that impeccably neat, hand-tailored suit. And everyone would be looking at us.

So what?

But it was too late. The impulse was gone.

I stood up. "Let's go."

"I thought you wanted the drink."

"I know you did." I still couldn't decide whether it was funny, pathetic or disgusting.

He looked as though he felt he should say something but couldn't decide what. He settled for, "Come on."

The waitress came over, hurriedly adding up the check. He pulled a five-dollar bill out of his wallet and tossed it onto the table.

"I'll get your change, sir."

"Keep it." He took my arm.

"*Thank* you, sir."

He took a second look. *This* time, he noticed her legs.

We waited while the attendant brought his car to the street. From the size of the 'thank you', I imagined Blake had given him a pretty good tip. But then, Blake *was* good about tipping.

We got into his car and I began to feel warm all over from the drink; not high, just comfortable. I suppose if I generally drank more, it would have taken more than one for me to be able to feel it.

He pulled out into the traffic. His lips were thin, jaw muscles tight.

"Tell me, Blake, are you *really* as successful with women as you'd like people to think?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, you're so awfully rude. Why would a woman want you?"

"You did," he answered evenly.

"I wanted you physically, but the real you shining through has counteracted it."

"Maybe the 'real me' doesn't 'shine through' with other women. Maybe you're just about the bitchiest female I've ever——"

"What? Made?"

"That's about it."

"These are the moments when I can stand you, Blake. When you're honest—revolting, but honest." I looked out the window. "Where the hell are you going?"

"My apartment," he answered quietly.

I sat up straight. "Now *look*——"

"Shut up." He reached his arm over my shoulder, yanking me close. At first I started to pull away—then I decided, what the hell?

His arm was strong and I felt small and warm beside him. Maybe I could close my eyes and pretend he was Frank. I tried, only it didn't work. I suppose I'd have needed at *least* five more drinks before anything like *that* might begin to work.

He pulled to a stop in front of one of those new landscaped, luxury-apartment buildings on the upper east side overlooking the river.

Some kind of attendant opened the car door and

helped me out. Blake handed him the keys and slipped his arm over my shoulder.

His apartment was beautiful and beautifully arranged even to the lamp on a table beside the door which cast just the proper amount of dim light throughout the livingroom. The carpet was beige, wall to wall; the furniture was walnut modern, sturdy and in excellent taste.

The bedroom was off to the right—no long hall between the two rooms, as in Frank's apartment. Blake seemed to have thought of everything.

I poked my nose into the kitchen, then turned around and faced him. "Very nice. Let me guess. You've got stereo hi-fi *and* etchings."

He smiled. "No etchings." He pointed to the wall above the couch. "An original Picasso."

I looked at it. "I like it."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"No stereo?"

He grinned. "Sure. Want to hear my record collection?"

"Not particularly."

I looked at him and suddenly realized he was unsure of himself. The great lover didn't quite know how to begin! Or maybe it was just me—as he'd said earlier, he couldn't figure me out. I'd heard somewhere that *that was supposed to be flattering to a woman*. With Blake, I found it annoying.

I wondered whether it had been this way last time. Maybe I'd been so unsure of *myself*, I hadn't noticed.

I tried to keep my face straight and I suppose the effort was obvious. "Aren't you supposed to sweep me off my feet along about this point? Aren't you supposed

fumbled with the catch on the bra. I got a sudden picture of me referring him to Frank for lessons on opening bras and almost laughed.

Then he was yanking and ripping at the rest of my clothes, his hands rough, face intense and I wound up helping him. He started to take care of his own clothes as he had last time. I reached over and opened his belt. At first, he looked startled.

"You lazy bastard," I spat. Then I suppose I looked startled; *Ellie Michaels, your language is deteriorating at a frightening pace!*

He laughed. "Okay, okay——"

We were both naked when we came together, and I suppose, for him, it was pretty much as it had been last time. For *me*, it was one hell of a lot different; I'd had a good teacher. The quick, hard movement of his hips was met by mine with all of the elemental instincts that had come alive when I was with Frank, and I was climbing that same hill; reaching for that same handful of sunlight—and it was there; I held it in the feel of his breath on my throat, the beat of his heart against my breasts, rising from the *real* meeting of our bodies and spreading through me like heavy liquor; tingles rising to a shrieking pitch, then silence, low and gentle silence broken only by deep breathing and the sound of a clock ticking somewhere in the semi-darkness of Blake Gelezio's bedroom.

CHAPTER TWELVE

He rolled onto his back, eyes closed.

I sat up. "Got a cigarette?"

He looked at me. "Bitch!"

"Huh?"

"How many guys since me?"

I could feel the color rising in my face. "Gee, I really can't remember off hand. Why? What's your problem?"

"You sure as hell didn't waste any time."

"Well, darling, I can't be a virgin *every* time with you. Besides, why do you care?"

"I don't."

"Like hell you don't."

"There are cigarettes in the headboard. Slide the panel."

I did. There were cigarettes, okay, and a clean ash-tray; certainly better planning than Frank with only a half-empty pack in a drawer.

I took a long drag. "I'm really trying to understand you, Blake. Is it because as long as you were the only one, there'd be no chance of me criticizing you?"

Comparing you with somebody else? Or was it that you wanted to be the only one where it worked for me—you wanted me to think it was just you so that I'd be willing and available whenever you wanted it? Or was it that *Mr. Gelezio's* women are expected to remain loyal to him and him only for as long as it lasts. Are you supposed to be so irresistible no woman could *think* of another man after she'd been in bed with you? You know, you *did* leave something to be desired last time."

"I didn't want to leave it that way and you know it!"

"Well I frankly can't see that there was much difference between the two times except that *I'd* changed—I knew a little more."

He rolled onto his side, laying his hand on my stomach. "Ellie, *honey*——"

I laughed. "Go on. Show me all your little tricks. I'm willing."

He jerked his hand away and for half a second, I thought he was going to hit me. I grabbed his wrist. "And *cut that out!* As far as I'm concerned, honey, cavemen belong in caves. I live in the city because I like it."

He threw his arms around me, holding me close and I knew he hated me. The whole thing was insane. I let him kiss me. I felt his thumbs hard against my nipples. His hand moved down over my stomach, stopping between my legs. I can't honestly say I was particularly impressed, but it *was* working. I tightened my arms around his back, running my fingers through his hair. I kissed his shoulder then bit him. Why the hell did I do that? I felt a shudder run through his body, his tongue warm and alive against mine.

He pressed down on me and the weight of his chest made it hard for me to breathe. "Take it easy, you two-ton ape!"

The pressure lessened and I waited for the rest of it, my thighs rising and falling in gentle, almost automatic anticipation. I felt his hand trying to bring us together. I reached down and touched him; maybe I could help.

He shoved me away, roughly—but not before it was too late; not before I knew!

He broke away and rolled onto his side, not facing me.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply; my heart was pounding, my body was still expecting what my mind kept telling me to forget. Take it easy, Miss Michaels, you'll live. You've been through it before; it was like this before—for *you*, at least, it was like this the first time.

My breathing became more regular; my heart stayed just about the same.

I looked at him. He was sitting on the side of the bed with his back towards me, smoking a cigarette, and for some insane reason, I was frightened. I wanted to tell him it was all right, that it was probably my fault, that as far as I was concerned, no one else ~~was~~ ever have to know. Instead, I just lay there.

I closed my eyes.

His voice startled me. "Get out."

"Blake, I—I'm sorry."

"Shut up. Get out."

I picked up my

"Blake——"

"It was *you*, bitch, it never happened with anyone but you!"

Maybe it was true. Maybe not.

"Real funny, huh? You tell anybody, I'll say you're a liar. I'll smear you so badly——"

"Stop it!"

"Get out."

He still hadn't looked at me; not even once.

I walked out of the apartment.

The evening had turned chilly. That was good. I needed it.

I caught a cab. Go ahead, splurge. Then I could smoke. I was beginning to feel like what he'd called me. The only time I'd realized he was unsure of himself was in the livingroom right before he'd slapped me. He should have slapped me again. He should have given me a black eye or something—*anything* rather than just sitting there, staring at the wall, smoking a cigarette.

At least past experience had shown he couldn't have me fired. I wondered what it would have been like if I'd taken that job in his department—the one he'd 'of-fered' me in his own quaint way.

I was glad we wouldn't see each other very often. I knew he usually didn't get in until around ten and I was usually there between nine and nine-thirty.

It was a little before eleven when I got back to the apartment. Janet was watching the roaring climax of a television show and only nodded when I walked in. I was glad.

I took a shower. I smiled. It would be absolutely inconceivable to Janet that I could possibly have gone

to bed with Blake after I'd slept with Frank and wanted so much for Frank to call.

I went to bed and wrapped my arms around the pillow. No, he couldn't have me fired, but was there anything else he could do? He'd said he'd smear me if I told anyone. Maybe he'd do it anyway, just on the *chance* I might be talking about it.

Even if he didn't, suppose I ran into him on the elevator. We got in at different times, but it was far from inconceivable that we might be leaving together.

I thought of quitting. Dammit, I didn't *want* to quit. I'd been there eight years. Sure, it wasn't particularly exciting, but I liked it. Also, the money was good. And I liked my boss.

I tried to picture John Kramer's reaction if I told him I was quitting. He'd probably say something like, 'Ridiculous. You can't quit.' I knew he depended on me for a lot of details. I also knew this would be the worst possible time for him to try and break in somebody new.

But maybe I owed it to Blake. Maybe it was the only way I could say I was sorry so he'd hear it.

I smiled. I knew I shouldn't; it wasn't really funny, it was pathetic. I thought of the original Picasso and the way the lamp by the door cast just enough light.

Maybe it *hadn't* ever happened to him before. I guess I didn't know enough about that sort of thing to really form an opinion.

The next morning, I was locking the door to the apartment when Dave Kelly across the hall walked out. He smiled. "Good morning."

"Hi. Isn't this a little early for you?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Can't have everything."

We walked to the elevator. I was startled by how blue his eyes were; Blake's eyes were gray. I suppose I'd forgotten—or else I'd never been that conscious of Dave before. That day when he'd made the half-hearted pass, it had been more or less understood that if I were the kind of girl who simply didn't, okay, but he wasn't interested. Maybe that was why I'd never particularly noticed his eyes—until now.

I checked my thoughts—fast. That was no answer—sleep with every man who wanted me because Frank Jelenzey didn't.

"How are you doing on the smoking?"

"I quit—again."

"Good for you!"

"It's been three days." He jerked his head back and forth several times in quick succession. "So far, I'm perfectly fine."

I laughed.

We stepped off the elevator into the lobby. He took a second look at me. "Hey, can I give you a lift?"

"Which way are you going?"

"Westchester."

"You work in *Westchester*?"

"For the next couple of weeks, I do. I work with writers whose manuscripts are close, but not exactly what we want to publish. This particular writer lives in Westchester."

I nodded. "Thanks anyway, but I can take the bus. I'd be out of your way."

He grinned. "At least I tried."

It was a nice grin; no smirks. I wondered whether

it would have been different if he'd known I was no longer the rigidly virtuous young woman who'd turned him down so many months ago.

John Kramer was already in his office when I got in.

I moved behind my desk and picked up where I'd left off yesterday.

I went out to lunch around one-thirty.

I got onto the elevator and Blake was there. His arm was touching the shoulder of some girl with black hair and I assumed she was with him. My eyes met his and I could feel the color rising in my cheeks. He looked about as uncomfortable as I felt. He nodded an awkward hello, lips thin and I could feel his hate as thick as smoke in a crowded room.

The girl glanced at me, then stepped a little closer to him. I suppose it was funny; the subtle demonstration that Blake Gelezio was with *her* and *whoever the hell* I was, I'd better notice and keep it in mind.

I slowed up when the elevator doors opened in the lobby; give them time to get ahead of me. No sense in bumping into each other trying to get to the street—maybe standing side by side waiting for *someone* else to get in or out of the door.

I'd forgotten about lunch times; the possibility of seeing Blake. I was sure my lunches were as irregular as his—we'd probably go on meeting in the elevator—probably two or three times a week. We always had. It was where I'd first seen him.

I honestly tried on the sandwich, but only got about a quarter of it finished.

I lit a cigarette; another advantage of coming in after one. I didn't have to feel guilty if I kept the seat long enough to finish the cigarette.

I remembered the days when I'd so looked forward to the elevator meetings; it was almost funny, I suppose.

I decided I'd quit. The only future for me in the job I had would be financial—but I could probably do just as well someplace else. If I'd been seriously interested in a career, I would have had myself transferred out of the shipping department years ago. Sure, I liked John Kramer—I liked him even more, now that I was thinking about not seeing him again, but that couldn't be helped. Besides, it wasn't *impossible* that I'd find someone else as easy to work for as he was.

I finished the coffee. The day was cool, but my hands were perspiring.

Kramer was still at his desk when I got back to the office. I hesitated, then knocked.

"Come in."

I opened the door. He had the phone receiver balanced between his shoulder and his ear, holding a cardboard container of coffee in one hand and making notes on a yellow tablet with the other.

"Yeah," he was saying, "Yeah, sure—I'll check it

out. Look, I don't *know* what happened—Yeah, okay. I'll get back to you."

He hung up. "What is it, Miss Michaels?"

"I——"

The phone rang. He picked up. "Yeah? What?" He held his hand over the mouthpiece, then released it long enough to say, "Kramer. Hold on——"

I got it out fast. "I'm quitting."

"*What?*" He turned his attention back to the phone, talked quickly, hung up and looked at me. "What do you mean, 'quitting'?"

"Just that."

"Ridiculous. You can't quit."

I tried not to smile and it wasn't easy; it was *exactly* what I'd thought he'd say."

"Mr. Kramer, I *am* quitting."

"We'll talk about it next week."

"There's nothing to talk about. I—I'll give you a month's notice, if you want that much."

"Sit down."

I did, uncomfortably.

"Now what's the trouble?"

I tried to picture his face if I told him the truth. I knew I'd have to stop thinking like that; I'd end up smiling in the wrong places in the conversation and he might think I was treating it as a joke. I didn't want him to think that—not *him*. "There's no trouble." I looked away from him and I suppose it was obvious that I was lying.

"Miss Michaels, how long have you been here?"

I stood up. "Look, I—I mean I'm leaving, and that's it. The only thing we have to settle is *when*." I was

sorry for the way it sounded; almost as though I were angry at him and I certainly wasn't. "I—I'm sorry," I offered awkwardly. "I didn't mean to snap."

His voice was soft. "What is it, money? I could probably get you a raise——"

"No, it's not money."

"Have you got another job?"

"No—I—I mean, not yet." I didn't want to answer any more questions; I wanted to walk out and, I suppose if it had been anyone except John Kramer, I would have.

"You getting married?"

I laughed. "No."

"It's not that funny. Those things *do* happen."

"So I've heard," I answered dryly. No, ~~that hadn't~~ come out right either; that was almost as though I were looking for a husband and hadn't been able to find one. I wondered how much the sudden ~~unsureness~~ had showed because he picked up right away.

"Miss Michaels, you are an attractive young woman and I have wondered on more than one occasion how much longer you'd be with us, but I had at least hoped you'd continue after the wedding until about the ~~ninth~~ month of your pregnancy."

First I was startled, then I laughed. "Mr. Kramer, I had no idea! I'm flattered."

"I'm glad that you're flattered. Now why the hell are you talking about leaving?"

He waited.

I looked away, awkwardly. "Look, I—I mean, the reasons are personal."

"Something to do with whoever it was who tried to get you fired?"

I'd forgotten. I could feel the color rising in my face.

"I see," he answered quietly. "And you feel there may be more problems from this same source?"

I swallowed hard. "*Please* don't. I—I'm sorry. I don't *want* to leave—I just have to, ~~that's all I mean~~ I want to."

"Why don't you think it over? ~~Get the matter~~"

"No!"

He let out a deep breath. "~~You're leaving~~ you're not here is *not* in jeopardy."

"I know. Thanks."

"If I ask you—personally—then would you reconsider?"

I shook my head. "I can't."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sorry."

"I—will a month be all right?"

"Six weeks."

"*Six weeks?*" At two or three times a week, it would mean seeing Blake in the area of twelve to sixteen times.

He looked curious. "You want out that badly?"

I nodded.

"Okay. We'll see. I'll get somebody to do the preliminary screening—you can do it. Check with Mary on which agencies we deal with. Also, get somebody from one of the temporaries so you'll have more time for the interviewing. Let me know when you've got somebody you think is right."

I nodded. "How long——"

"Depends—on you. When you think you've got her, bring her in. If she looks okay to me, she's hired. Give us one week to help break her in."

"Okay. Thanks——"

"Look, if you—I mean, if you decide you want to talk about it——"

"Sure. Thanks."

I walked out.

I went back to my office and dialled Blake's extension. I gave his secretary my name, then waited.

It was a long minute before I heard his voice. I wondered how much of it had been spent debating about whether he wanted to talk to me.

"Yeah?"

"Blake, I'm leaving. I'm quitting."

There was a slight pause, followed by, "When?"
"Probably within a month."

"Don't do me any favors."

I thought of a flip answer, but settled for, "I'm not."
I'd done enough to Blake with the flip answers.

"Suit yourself."

He hung up.

I checked with Mary, then called the employment agencies.

When I got back to the apartment that evening, Janet was in the kitchen. I dumped my purse on the couch and kicked off my shoes.

She came into the living room, wearing an apron over the dress she'd worn to work this morning. "Hi. Did you eat yet?"

"Huh? No."

"Good! I'm treating us. I got steaks."

I looked at her and smiled. My stomach was still a mess, my head hurt and I'd been debating about settling for an eggnog and maybe a piece of toast—I honestly didn't know whether a steak would stay down.
"Thanks—I owe you a steak."

"I'll cook it."

I knew the least I could do was try. She walked back into the kitchen.

The telephone rang.

She was in the living room in about two seconds.
"That's probably Charlie. He said he'd call."

She grabbed the receiver. I was already on my feet for my tactful little trip into another room when I heard her say, "Oh, hi, Frank——"

I swung around, feeling suddenly shaky.

"Yes," she went on, "she's here. Wait a second——"

She handed me the receiver, her face a living question mark of anticipation. I waved her back into the kitchen as I sat on the couch.

She looked almost apologetic; as though she'd forgotten our rules but would try not to let it happen again.

"Hello?" I was making a conscious effort to keep my voice calm.

"Ellie, this is Frank. I want to see you."

I felt all mixed up. I felt like slapping him and hugging him; I wanted to hurt him—deeply, but even the thought of him *being* hurt frightened me. He wanted to see me—just like that. Like last time. No, that wasn't fair. We'd had a date last time and I'd called it off then back on again.

"Ellie, you still there?"

"Yes."

"Can I pick you up?"

May I pick you up, I thought. "No. I—I'm busy."

For half a second, I was afraid he'd be angry. I'd said it because *I* was angry; maybe because I resented him taking me for granted—calling me at six-thirty and suddenly wanting to pick me up.

"I'm about ten minutes away from you. What time would you *be* free?"

I wondered whether he'd believed me. Probably not. "Frank, I'm *not* busy. I only said I was because I was angry that you hadn't called before now. Angry and—oh hell, I guess I was *hurt*."

"I'll be there in about ten minutes." He hung up.

It was about two more minutes before Janet came

out of the kitchen, obviously biting her lip to keep from asking me what had happened.

I laughed. My hands were shaking and I hoped she didn't notice. "He's coming over."

She looked as though she'd gotten just what she wanted for Christmas. "Did he say why he didn't call before?"

"No."

"Maybe he was tied up on a case or something."

I told her with a look what we both knew—that he *still* could have found time to pick up a phone.

"—or something," she repeated awkwardly. "Hey, do you want me to leave?" Her face turned suddenly pink before she'd even finished the sentence.

I guess mine was about the same color, rapidly deepening. "He is *not* coming over to go to bed with me!"

She looked ready to cry. "I didn't mean——"

I jumped to my feet. "I know you didn't. I'm sorry, Janet, I'm so sorry. It's not fair of me to take it out on you."

"I could go to a movie or something—I mean, if you want to talk to him."

I shook my head. "He might think I'd asked you to."

"Oh. Okay. Hey, do you still want the steak?"

"Let's save it for tomorrow."

"Okay. I'll save mine too."

I went out in the kitchen and made the eggnog. It went down easily enough and in about two minutes, I realized it would probably stay there.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I started to comb my hair then tossed the comb back onto the dresser. It was ridiculous. If I got it all neat and exactly the way I wanted, I could worry about it getting out of place again; I could think about my hair instead of Frank—I could *concentrate* on how neat my hair was and then the other things wouldn't seem so important. Besides, I wouldn't want Frank to think I'd combed it just for him.

I shook my head about three times and re-checked the mirror. Yes, that was better; it was pretty much as it had been before I'd started.

The downstairs buzzer sounded and I jumped, startled.

I walked into the kitchen to answer it, half-expecting Janet's usual 'I'll get it' to reach it before I did.

She was leaning against the sink, looking oddly self-conscious. "I can at least stay out of your way."

"Don't be silly," I answered awkwardly.

The doorbell rang.

I walked into the hall and answered.

He was wearing a white shirt, open at the neck with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of dark gray slacks. My first reaction was wondering whether he might be cold. It was too cold for no jacket.

Our eyes met and I knew he wanted to kiss me; maybe even as much as *I* wanted it. He put his hands on my shoulders.

"Hi, Frank." It came from Janet, awkwardly.

He smiled. "Hi, kid——"

At least it was nice to know it didn't bother him—Janet knowing. Or maybe it was just that he was used to it and I wasn't; used to having a girl know he hadn't been exactly only holding hands with her roommate. Or maybe he wasn't even thinking about it. I'd gotten the feeling before that what anyone else thought wasn't particularly important to him.

He looked back to me. "Let's go."

I wanted to ask him 'where?' I wanted to tell him I wouldn't go to his apartment with him; that he couldn't simply call me at any last minute and expect me to drop everything and hop into bed with him, but Janet was still standing there and I think a scene like that would have been as hard on her as it would have been for me with her watching.

"I'll get a sweater," I answered quietly.

I went into the bedroom.

When I came back out, he and Janet were talking about her wedding. I couldn't help noticing the way she looked at him—as though he were suddenly different. I suppose he seemed different to me too; maybe because I knew him so much better and I suppose she knew him a little better through what she'd seen of my reactions after I'd slept with him. I ~~smiled~~ I

stumbled onto one of those little axioms of life: if a woman wants to really know a man, she should go to bed with him.

He slipped his arm over my shoulders and we walked out.

I gave up on trying to talk back to him; trying not to show how much I'd wanted to see him. I stood close to him in the elevator, not speaking, only feeling his arm around me, the touch of his cheek against my hair.

We got into his car and stayed close while he started driving.

"Where are we going."

"Friend's place. He gave me the key."

I closed my eyes, feeling my hands turn into fists. Then I moved away from him.

He looked startled and pulled to the curb. It was a no parking zone in the middle of Manhattan with people walking by and other cars passing in both directions.

"What's wrong?" he asked seriously.

"You. It's a little too sordid, that's all."

"What?"

"Your friend's apartment. What happened? Meet somebody in a bar and she turned you down? So you decided, what the hell? Ellie's right around the corner—only ten minutes. I'll call her."

He let out a deep breath. "Ellie, I want to marry you."

How startled I was must have showed. He laughed. "You look like I just kicked you in the stomach."

I wished he hadn't said it. If only he'd given some inkling, maybe I could have stopped him.

man were thinking but it hadn't mattered because I'd known it wasn't true.

We stepped off the elevator. He took a key from his pocket and opened one of the doors.

We walked inside.

The place looked as though it had been hastily cleaned up with magazines on the end tables at varying angles. A bookcase near the couch had two shelves filled with the *Harvard Classics*, the top shelf crammed tight with soft cover murder mysteries. I laughed and pointed. "I can see why *he* likes you."

"Huh?" His glance followed the direction of my finger. He laughed. "Oh—yeah."

He put his hands on my shoulders and looked at me. I didn't want him to talk; only hold me, want me as I wanted him and in no other way.

He kissed me, running his fingers through my hair, his hands hard against my breasts. "I wanted to call you," he whispered, "I almost asked you last time we were together, but I wanted to be sure. I *started* to ask you. Then after I brought you home, I figured I better wait; I better give myself time to think. I wanted to call you so bad. Twice I even dialled your number, but I hung up before it rang."

Badly, badly, *badly*, not *bad*, I thought. My God, it was grotesque! I wanted to cry, I wanted to scream. I didn't want him to go on anymore, but I was afraid to stop him; afraid he'd stop holding me.

I wondered what was wrong with me. I wondered why his grammar was suddenly so important—I'd noticed it before, but it hadn't ever seemed *this* important.

"Stop *what*? I'm not touching you anymore. Oh, wait a minute—that was okay, wasn't it. No complaints in that department."

"That's——"

"What? Crude? Vulgar?"

"Unfair," I answered quietly.

"Unfair?"

"The house—the little house with a lawn and bicycles in the front yard. You still want it?"

I could feel him watching me, closely—anticipating, analyzing, distrusting. "Yeah. Why?"

For half a second, I'd almost hoped. But it wouldn't have done any good—it wouldn't have worked anyway. "You said you'd changed."

He shrugged his shoulders and took another drag on the cigarette, then stubbed it out. "I thought I had. I suppose it was partly from listening to Charlie all the time. For crissake, it's all he talks about. The other part—the *big* part—that was knowing you. I never knew anybody like you before. I guess it just took a little time to learn we don't play in the same league."

"Now wait a——"

"No, it's okay, honey—I was just confused. I just got a roll in the hay mixed up with something else. That's about all it was, right?"

"Did I ever pretend it was anything more?" I answered evenly.

He was quiet.

"*Did I?*" I insisted.

"I'm trying to remember, okay?"

I sat down beside him and stretched out my legs.

My head hurt. "It was more than that and you know it. It *is* more than that."

He shook his head.

"What do you mean?" I asked uncomfortably.

"Honey, I mean I'm going to get you out of my system. First I'm going to find me a nice piece and then I'm going to get good and drunk."

I looked at him. "My God, you really mean it!"

He looked startled, then he laughed. "Of *course* I mean it."

"But *why*? Why can't we go on seeing each other?"

"Because I'm in *love* with you, for crissake!"

"Well maybe I'm in love with you too!"

"Then *why*——?"

"Why don't I want to *marry* you? Frank, I don't want to marry *anybody*. The house—kids—Friday night at the movies; I don't want it. I grew up with it all around me and I don't want it."

"Well what the hell *do* you want?"

"I—I don't know," I answered simply.

He shook his head and stood up. "Good luck on finding it."

He started towards the door. I caught his arm and he jerked free, almost throwing me off balance. "Cut it out!"

"What? Touching you? Wanting you? Trying to stop you from walking out that door?"

"That's about it."

"No!"

At first I thought he was angry, then he laughed.

"You going to stop me?"

"Yes."

The grin remained. "I'm bigger than you are."

I smiled. Maybe I thought it was funny, maybe I was flirting with him or maybe I wanted to feel I was in on the joke, not its subject. I put my arms around him and stood close, the length of our bodies touching.

He kept his hands at his sides. "Oh, *I* see—you're going to make me."

"That's cru——" I broke off, but it was too late.

"That's *what?* Crude?" He started to lift my arms from his shoulders, but I hung on as tightly as I could. I grabbed the back of his hair, twisting it between my fingers, then touched my lips against his—breaking away, touching again—lightly, teasingly. It was cruel and selfish and I knew it, but maybe if I could get it to work this time, then there'd be a next time and I could go on and on seeing him until—I broke off. Until what? Where would it go? I didn't know, but with his arms around me, it didn't matter; if only he'd put arms around me!

He started to turn his head then suddenly stopped, holding me with all the strength and force I'd ever remembered. His mouth came down on mine—hard; so hard I could taste blood and suddenly I was almost afraid but I still didn't want him to stop. I moved my hands between us, palms flat against his chest, feeling the strength and hardness of his body. I moved my thighs against his and knew he wanted me at least as much as I wanted him. I touched him over his clothes with my hand, then drew away, stupidly self-conscious about having done it, only at that point, it was more than a little too late. He half pushed, half pulled me, then both of us were on the floor, still hold-

ing each other, his fingers yanking and ripping at the cloth that kept us apart.

Then there was nothing separating us, his hand between us, taking care of the last detail with intense perfection in spite of the way I kept twisting and fighting him. I don't even know *why* I was fighting; maybe it was just that all of it was happening so fast I couldn't keep up with it and I wanted to; I wanted it so terribly.

His hands clamped down on my breasts, over the coarse wool material of my dress, his fingers rough and kneading. My arms were tight around him, hands yanking at his shirt until I could feel the warm flesh of his back, my fingernails cruel and digging, his thighs against mine at a pace I couldn't match, but the hill was shorter, the sunlight closer and I could feel a low moan rising in my throat; escaping from my lips seconds after his body had become still and tired against mine.

He moved away, slowly, and I thought I felt his lips brush against my hair as he'd kissed it so many other times when he'd held me, but I couldn't be sure.

He pulled himself onto his knees and began fixing his clothes. I touched his arm, half expecting him to jerk away. He didn't, and I wondered whether he wanted it as much as I did—the tenderness afterwards. If he did, it was apparent he wasn't about to admit it.

"Why did you wait for me?" I asked quietly, suddenly remembering it had been over for him first. I knew he'd been hurt and angry; it would have been so easy for him to be cruel.

"I don't know what you're talking about." He was buckling his belt and seemed to be keeping his attention right where it was.

"You didn't have to," I went on.

"I told you, I don't know——"

"——what I'm talking about. Okay."

He stood up, making sure his shirt was tucked in. "Come on. I'll take you home."

I got to my feet and straightened my clothes. "Frank——"

"What?"

I looked at him, then suddenly threw my arms around him.

"It won't work," he said dryly, "not twice in a row—not *that* close together."

"That's not it, you *know* that's not it." I closed my eyes. "Hold me, Frank—just hold me."

His arms moved around me, slowly, and I kept my eyes closed, feeling small and warm and nothing was important anymore; nothing except the strength of his body against mine and knowing he still cared.

Then his hands were on my shoulders, abruptly—shoving. I stepped back, almost losing my balance.

"For crissake, Ellie, what the hell do you want from me?"

I stared at him, startled.

"You *want* me to be in love with you?" he went on, "Why? You think it's funny?"

"You know that's not true!"

His voice was calmer. "Look, will you let me alone? *Just forget you ever met me.*"

"I can't," I answered simply.

"You call me, I'll hang up on you."

I knew he meant it and all of the softness I'd felt before was suddenly replaced by a feeling of panic—panic that I'd really never see him again.

He opened the door and nodded towards the hall. "Come on."

We rode down in the elevator without speaking. The doorman took a second look at me on the way out and his thoughts were obvious, but I didn't care. For the first time in my life, I simply didn't give a damn. I *wasn't* ashamed. It was none of his business. To hell with him.

We got into Frank's car and he started driving. I was sitting on the middle of the seat, holding a cigarette with fingers that trembled. I thought about the house; the kids—seeing Frank every morning, watching him shave. I remembered how much I'd wanted to watch him shave. It was insane. I looked at his face now and saw the darkening shadows that ~~would~~ disappear with a razor tomorrow morning.

The lawn; the bicycles—maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

I closed my eyes and wondered ~~who the hell~~ I thought I was kidding. Cooking dinners in a ~~red~~ apron; making sure the dog had fresh ~~meat~~ nuts within a month, Frank or no Frank.

He pulled to a stop in front of ~~the apartment house~~ where I lived. I sat and looked at him for a minute. Our eyes met, then he ~~turned his head away~~.

Okay, if that was the way it ~~ended~~, more tears—at least not ~~now~~; ~~he~~ hesitated to think what it ~~would be like~~.

So Frank Jelenzey would find himself a nice piece and—or maybe *I'd* served that purpose. Maybe now he'd just get drunk and skip the girl.

I thought of everything he'd taught me; how different it had been with Blake the second time, thanks to Frank and his patient instructions. Frank wanted me to marry him; I suppose I was flattered. Or maybe Frank *had* wanted me to marry him—past tense.

He reached across me and opened the door for me to get out. Our bodies were so close; it would have been so easy to put my arms around him. He'd told me back in the apartment that it wouldn't work—not twice in a row and that close together, but that had been twenty minutes—maybe half an hour ago.

I touched his shoulder—gently, half expecting him to shove me away.

He didn't. He closed his eyes. "Get out, Ellie—*please*."

I dropped my arm. "I'm sorry. Somebody called me an unpleasant word for a female dog the other evening. Maybe they were right."

He looked at me and laughed. "'An unpleasant word for a female dog.'"

I smiled. "Good night."

"So long." It sounded more like a request than a statement.

Okay. Request granted. *I honestly never meant to hurt you, Frank, and I'm sorry.* "So long," I answered quietly.

I got out and waited while he pulled away. He looked back—once. I'd wondered whether he would.

I stood there and waited for the tears.

Only they didn't come.

I couldn't understand it.

I took a deep breath and walked into the building, swinging my purse at my side—lightly. I felt like tossing it up in the air and catching it; catch my purse, catch a snowball, catch a stone by a stream someplace in summer.

The elevator stopped and one of the other tenants stepped off with her dog—time to walk the dog, *nice* little dog! I leaned over and petted his head. "Good evening!"

She seemed pleasantly surprised and I suddenly wondered whether I'd ever spoken to her before in all the years we'd lived in the same building.

She nodded. "Good evening."

I got onto the elevator and pushed the button.

I climbed off and started for our apartment, then leaned against the wall and dug out my keys. I suppose I could have rung the bell, but she might have been taking a nap or wrapped up in the climax of a television show.

The door across the hall opened. It was Dave. He was wearing dark brown slacks and a white shirt, open at the neck, tie still knotted, but loose. He grinned when he saw me, throwing his hand into the air, one finger raised like an exclamation point. "Just the girl I wanted to see!"

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I laughed. "Don't tell me, let me guess. The tobacco industry just won another round."

He shook his head. "You're not only beautiful, you're brilliant!"

I reached into my purse and tossed him the pack. I kept rooting, then shrugged my shoulders. "Nope—no matches."

"Matches? Oh, honey, *I've* got matches. *Boy*, have I got matches! All over the apartment. I have to shovel them out of the bathtub before I can take a shower. I play with them on rainy days—build houses." He winked. "Want to come over and count matches?"

I knew he was kidding; good, clean fun. Brother, that's what *you* think!

I smiled. "Why Dave, I'd *love* to count matches with you!"

He looked startled. "You serious?"

"Sure."

He pushed the door, then stood holding it open with

his back. "Step into my museum. I've also got a genuine, unabridged Webster's Dictionary!"

"You're kidding."

He shook his head.

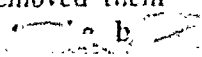
"Do you really need it?"

"No, but my mother gave it to me. She figured since I was an editor, I should have it."

The apartment was pretty much as I'd remembered, except that last time, I hadn't even noticed the magnificent full-sized dictionary on its own little stand by the window!

There were other things I hadn't noticed; such as the slight difference in layout between his apartment and ours. For one thing, there was no hall between the bedroom and living room; the layout here was similar to Blake's. I remembered that Janet would be moving out when she married Charlie in January and I'd be looking for either a new room-mate or another apartment. I decided to skip it on the room-mate. I knew I wouldn't be able to afford anything quite as nice as what we had now, but I looked around and decided this was the layout I wanted.

New apartment; new job, but not in some shipping department cubby hole. I'd been flattered by how much Mr. Kramer had wanted me to stay. I'd also been encouraged. I decided I must have been a better secretary than I'd realized; I'd probably be able to get *exactly* the kind of job I wanted.

There was a mass of papers on the coffee table. He scooped them neatly into a pile, then removed them to a corner of the desk and walked 

"Drink?"

"Okay."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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"You're kidding."

He shook his head.

"Do you really need it?"

"No, but my mother gave it to me. She figured since I was an editor, I should have it."

The apartment was pretty much as I'd remembered, except that last time, I hadn't even noticed the magnificent full-sized dictionary on its own little stand by the window!

There were other things I hadn't noticed; such as the slight difference in layout between his apartment and ours. For one thing, there was no hall between the bedroom and living room; the layout here was similar to Blake's. I remembered that Janet would be moving out when she married Charlie in January and I'd be looking for either a new room-mate or another apartment. I decided to skip it on the room-mate. I knew I wouldn't be able to afford anything quite as nice as what we had now, but I looked around and decided this was the layout I wanted.

New apartment; new job, but not in some shipping department cubby hole. I'd been flattered by how much Mr. Kramer had wanted me to stay. I'd also been encouraged. I decided I must have been a better secretary than I'd realized; I'd probably be able to get *exactly* the kind of job I wanted.

There was a mass of papers on the coffee table. He scooped them neatly into a pile, then removed them to a corner of the desk and walked to the bar.

"Drink?"

"Okay."

"What?"

"Scotch?"

He nodded. "How?"

"On the rocks."

"Scotch on the rocks. Coming up." He walked into the kitchen and returned with two ice-filled glasses. He started to pour, then turned around and nodded towards the couch. "Sit down. Kick off your shoes. Make yourself comfortable."

I moved to the couch, sat down, kicked off my shoes and made myself comfortable.

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